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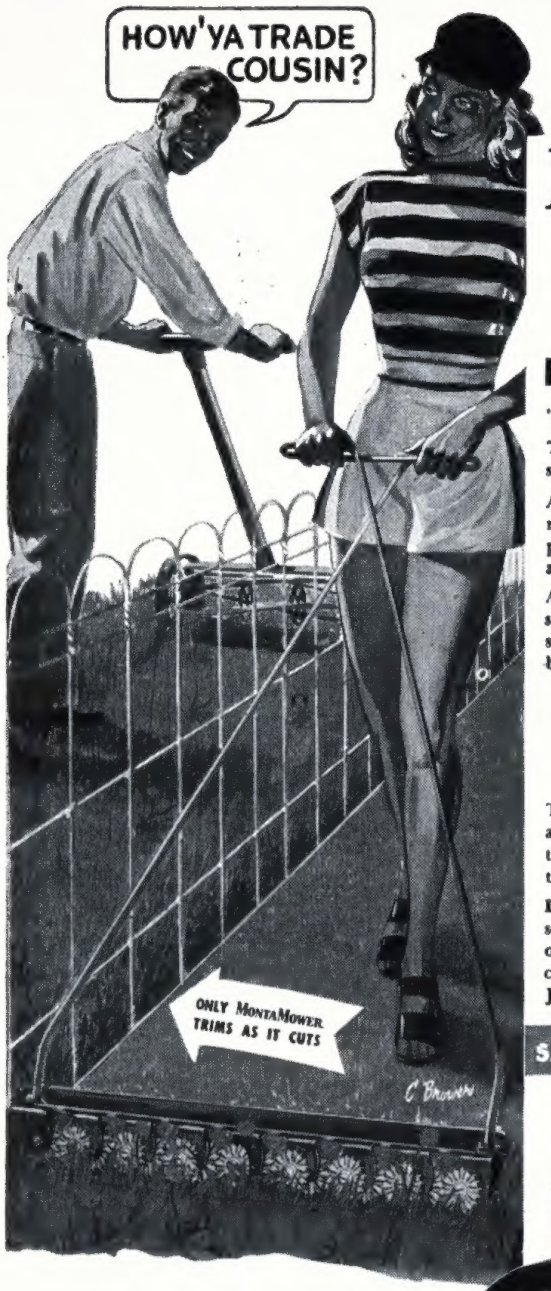

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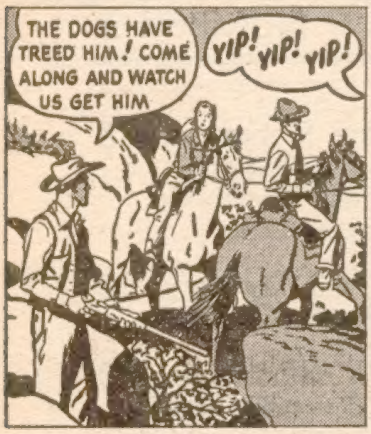

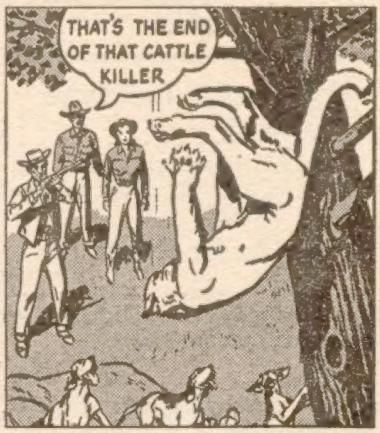

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A crew of true-blue men drove three thousand longhorns toward far-off Abilene and a waiting fortune . . . But among all those ill-paid, loyal punchers who rode through hell for a steel-mauled boss—was one crafty, deadly Judas!

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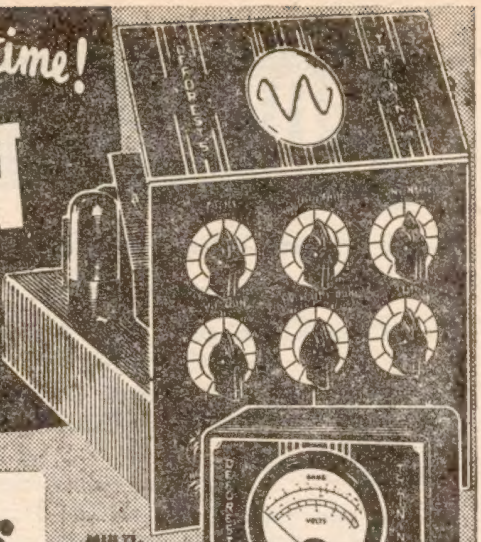

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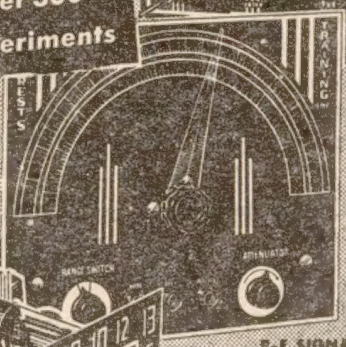

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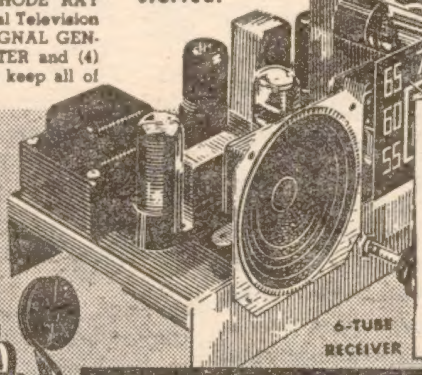

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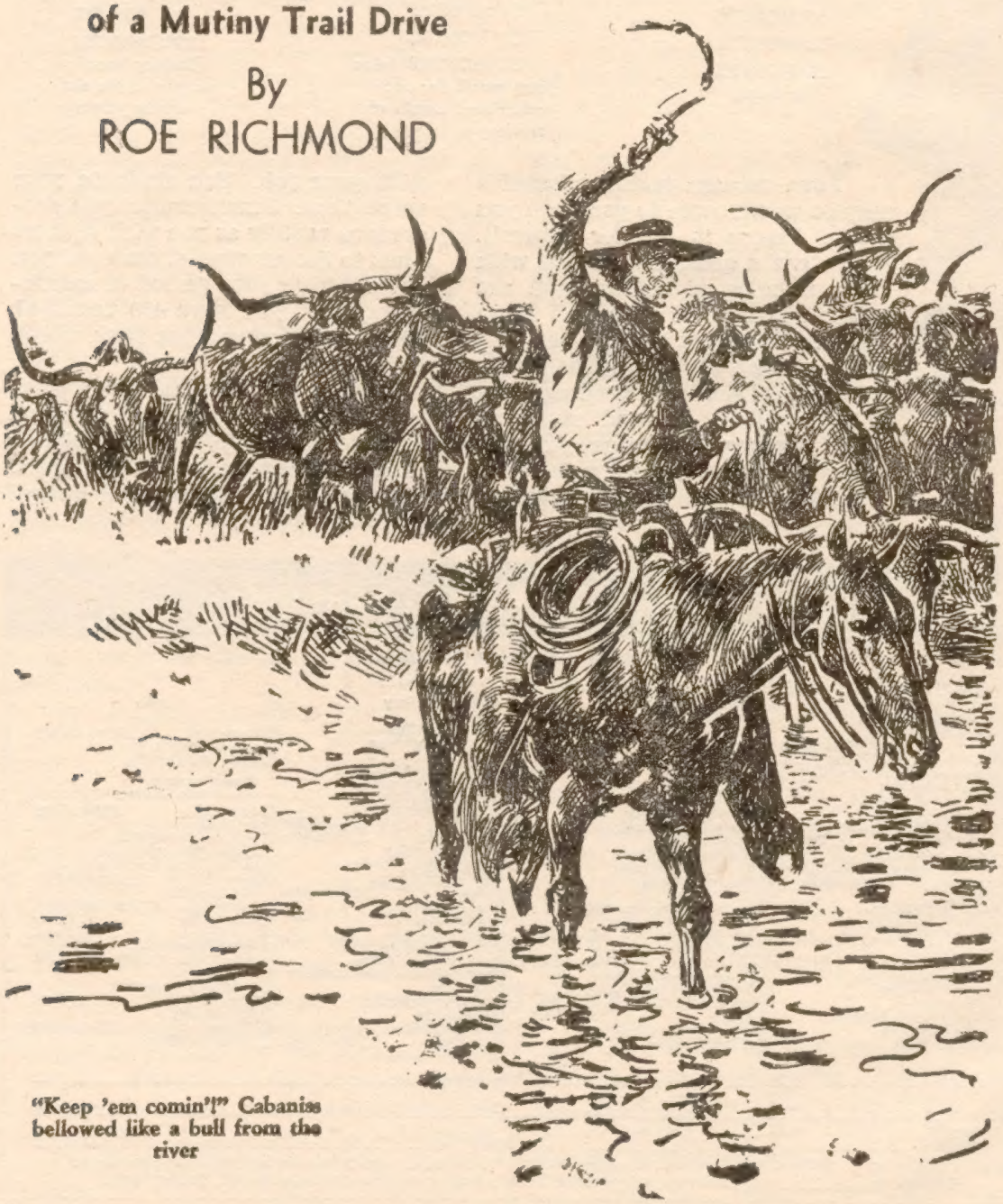
WE'LL FIGHT 'EM THROUGH TO ABILENE!

Hard-Hitting Novel of a Mutiny Trail Drive

By ROE RICHMOND



"Keep 'em comin'!" Cabaniss bellowed like a bull from the river

Onward through the churning, stifling dust of the trail, moved those three thousand longhorns and the twenty-one men. Abilene, and the golden fortune that waited there, was a long way from the Rio Grande but, with each mile, a plan grew in Cowpuncher Pete Laval's mind, the murderous seeds planted by a girl called Lola—a deadly plan to divide, conquer, and kill! . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Beware the Mutiny Boss!

"IT'S what they call a vicious circle," Pete Laval said, smiling with a flash of white teeth in his reckless face. He rode, as he walked and dressed and wore his hat, with an easy rakehell swagger. There was arrogance in the tilt of his black head, the twist of his mouth, the light in his brown eyes.

"What do you mean, Pete?" asked Slim

Renner, turning two steers in on that flank of the drive. Renner, slouched long and loose in the saddle, was often questioning the worldly Laval as to his meanings. They were both in the middle twenties but Renner's experience had been limited.

"All this, Slim." Laval gestured broadly over the plodding mass of cattle in its sunshot saffron haze of dust, the sunburnt, wind-whipped riders with wide hatbrims low against the glare and scarfs drawn over nose and mouth to keep out alkali. "Three months on the trail, or more—call it a hundred days. You draw a hundred dollars, say, in Abilene, and maybe it's gone by mornin'. You're flat broke again. Nothin' to do but ride back home and work all winter for twenty a month and found. Comes another spring, another drive, and you do it all over again."

"You don't have to throw it all away in one night," Renner said.

"But most of 'em do," Pete Laval said. "Last year every hand in the crew was busted three days after hittin' Abilene, except old Jessop, Fritz Ullmer, Wylie Winfield and a few like that. But I learned my lesson, Slim, from a girl up there named Lola. Do you wanta work all your life for a dollar a day or less? That's what she asked me."

"What are you goin' to do?" protested Renner. "If you haven't got a stake to start with, what can you do but work for wages?"

"Get yourself a stake," Laval said. "There are lots of ways, Slim."

"Maybe, but I don't know any." Renner shook his head, sun-bleached under the hat. He was tall in the saddle, broad across the shoulders, slim at waist and flank, with a plain bronzed face, clear gray eyes and a wide pleasant mouth. Renner was simple, straight-forward and direct, naturally frank and honest. Not at all stupid, although men like Laval might think him so because he said what he meant, told the truth and expected others to do likewise.

"Well, I'm goin' to figure some before long," Pete Laval said. "You want to get in too?"

"It all depends, Pete," Renner drawled.

Laval frowned in annoyance. The plan had been growing in his mind ever since the last drive to Kansas, the first seeds planted by that bright blonde girl named Lola Lee. A man could spend an entire lifetime slaving for others and never have a thing to show for it. A cowhand never got together enough money to make it worthwhile to start saving, and every time he flung away three months' pay he sold himself back into bondage. Nearly a year now Pete Laval had been thinking and brooding on this.

There were three thousand longhorns and twenty-one men, up from Colonel Madigan's Bar-M on the Rio Grande with the colonel's son Hal heading his first big drive, bound a thousand miles north to the railhead at Abilene, Kansas. When Laval had learned that the Madigan kid would be in charge, he decided that opportunity had come. All the way up Laval had been talking to Renner and others. He'd been clever, subtle, never committing himself, sounding them out with shrewd caution and surgical incisiveness. At twenty-six ambition had come to Pete Laval . . . he was tired of aimless drifting in routine jobs.

Young Hal Madigan, riding point with Doak Cabaniss, the red brawny brute of a trailboss, and Ace Alsobrine, one of the fastest gunhands in Texas, was nervy, troubled and worried in his new responsibility. Only twenty-one, sensitive, delicate and frail in comparison with his rawboned ruthless giant of a father, the boy had tried to plead out of the assignment but the colonel wouldn't hear of it.

"Hellfire and damnation, boy!" roared the colonel. "At your age I was ramroddin' the toughest outfit that ever run beef. I had killed half a dozen men, nearly killed a lot more, and mastered more women than most men ever dance with in a lifetime. You're takin' that herd to Kansas, Hal. Three thousand prime cattle, twenty riders, and you're the boss. I expect you to lean some on Cabaniss, Alsobrine and Hod Gilkesin. You'll learn from them and from old Jessop, Ullmer, Winfield and Needle Vereen. But you'll be the top man just the same, and make 'em know it."

IT HAD gone smoothly enough so far. Young Madigan, fair-faced as a girl under his auburn curls, blue-eyed, dim-

pled, handsome of face and graceful of figure, was good with a horse, rope and gun. He could build a point and string it out, work the swing and bring up the drag. No son of the colonel could grow up a novice at this business, whether he liked it or not. With Doak Cabaniss, Ace Alsobrine and hulking Hod Gilkeson as Hal's assistants, it was no problem to maintain discipline.

If those three hard-bitten stockmen were secretly scornful of the fresh-faced stripling in command they concealed it well. Loyal to the colonel, they stood ready to strike down anyone who questioned the son's authority or revealed any contempt of the boy. And they drove the riders as Hal never could have, Cabaniss and Gilkeson the raw brute force, backed always by the threat of Alsobrine's guns.

Riding the swing, Laval kept hammering away at the quiet reserve of Slim Renner, his words barbed and flicking in the heat and dust. "Madigan don't even own all these cattle. At least a third are mavericks or strays. You saw them different brands at round-up, Slim."

"If other men let their stock run wild for years you can't blame the colonel for pickin' 'em up," Renner reasoned. "He kept on fightin' when the other ranchers quit."

"But why should *he* get all the strays?" persisted Laval. "Why not some of the poor small owners? Why not some of the hired hands—like you and me, Slim?"

"We wouldn't get away with it, Pete," Renner said.

"That's what I'm gettin' at!" Laval said. "That's the system. A rich man can steal but a poor man can't, don't you see?"

Renner nodded. "I reckon. But what can you do about it?"

"Fight," Laval said. "How did any of the big ones get started? By fightin', shootin', killin', robbin', tearin' off what they wanted. It's the only way, Slim."

"You mean turn bad, turn outlaw?" Renner asked.

"Is Colonel Madigan an outlaw? Lacey, McCullough, Duprey, are they outlaws?" Laval demanded. "Not now, not any more. But in the beginnin' they were."

"It was different then," Renner said. "There wasn't much law when they started. A man couldn't do it now."

Pete Laval swore and gestured with impatience. "A *man* can do 'most anythin', anywhere and any time. If he's enough of a man."

Renner sighed. "I guess I'm not then."

"Dollar a day man?" Laval sneered. "Until you're too old to ride, or you get tromped to death, or shot by a rustler, or cut to pieces by Indians!"

"Maybe so," said Renner. . . .

Northward across Texas they drove, following the Balcones fault, on to the clay-banked, sandy-bottomed Colorado, across the shallows of Brush Creek, traversing rolling grasslands dotted with scrub oak and hackberry strung with cottonwoods, on past the thin, drying-up Leon and the low-running Trinity, toward the Red River at the northern boundary of Texas. Eight, ten and twelve miles a day, roasting and sweating in the sun, choking in the dust that hung forever above the herd, a dense unending pall of gray-brown and yellow. Saddle-cramped, bone-tired, aching-weary, they hazed the cattle along, the dirt turning to mud-plaster with their perspiration, their burning eyes red-rimmed and sore in the furnace glare.

DOAKE CABANISS, Ace Alsobrine and Hod Gilkeson rode the point, while young Madigan ranged back and forth along the line. On the left flank working the swing with Laval and Renner were Kelleway, Wylie Winfield and Fritz Ullmer. On the right side Drake Bemis, Price Pollard, Yancey Tarver, Pine Halberstaldt and Sax Scobel rode the swing. Deep in the dust of the drag old Jessop was in charge with Lou Libbey, Teel Bradder, Link Shuford and Fish Finley pushing the lame and laggard animals, the weak and crippled.

Behind the drag rumbled the high old chuck wagon with Needle Vereen, the cook, handling the reins and whip, a sharp, wise little old man with a seamed, sunken face, bright birdlike eyes, and gray hair awry. And bringing up the remuda was Horse Hornaday, the sad-faced, bow-legged, leather-tough wrangler. Twenty-one men up from the Mexican border, driving Colonel Madigan's Texas beef

north to Kansas and the Santa Fe Railroad.

Pete Laval thought he had them pretty well sorted out and lined up by now. He was sure of Sax Scobel and Teel Bradder, a couple of tough untamed young gunhands, and coyote-faced Link Shuford, who lacked their raw courage but was sly, slick and utterly unscrupulous. Pine Halberstaldt, sour-faced, prim-lipped and ascetic, was a natural born rebel and could be counted on to rise against anybody in authority. Big Drake Bemis, rough, ready and powerful, had the same hunger for wealth and power that drove Laval, the same defiant contempt for law, order and humanity in general. Drake Bemis was ripe for revolt but he might want to run the show himself.

Laval figured he could win Slim Renner over in time, and if Renner came he would bring young Kelleway with him. Lou Libbey was another possibility, and Fish Finley, a spineless, colorless, on-the-fence type of fellow, would join up the minute it looked as if Laval's rebellion was going to prove successful. There was an outside chance of getting Price Pollard too, for Price was a crafty ambitious and unprincipled man, although to date he had always shown a surprisingly sentimental loyalty to Colonel Madigan.

Counting himself then, Laval could be fairly certain of ten men, eleven if he could shake Pollard loose. That would split the camp right down the middle, and with the surprise element in their favor that should do the trick.

The others Laval discarded as hopelessly true to Madigan and the Bar-M, and with most of them the affiliation was so strong they would die rather than give it up. The opposition would be formidable, of course, built around fighting men like Doak Cabannis, Hod Gilkeson, Ace Alsobrine and young Hal Madigan himself. Old Jessop, gay young Yancey Tarver, solid Fritz Ullmer, sober, earnest Wylie Winfield, were strictly devoted to the colonel. Needle Vereen, the canny little cook, and Horse Hornaday, the wiry wrangler, were Madigan men to the grave. And that's exactly where they'd wind up, Laval thought grimly. There was no sense wasting time in trying to convert any of those faithful supporters, but Laval was convinced that he wouldn't need them anyway.

The place to spring it, Laval had decided, was at the crossing of the Arkansas River, the last big ford before the plains of Kansas, and Abilene. But that was a long way yet. If the opportunity arose Laval thought it would be a sound policy to get rid of some of the loyalists before then. There were always accidents on the trail in which men died. Dangerous river crossings, stampedes, terrific storms, hostile Indians in the Nations, and rustlers down from the Missouri line. It shouldn't be difficult to eliminate some of the tougher opponents without arousing suspicion. On any large cattle drive there was a thin line between life and death, always and inevitably, twenty-four hours a day.

SLIM RENNER was bothered by the change in Laval, the disenssion Pete was creating in the ranks. Gradually, under Laval's insistent efforts, the crew was breaking in two. It was obvious in the dead-panned sullenness of Sax Scobel and Teel Bradder, the fanatical gleam in Pine Halberstaldt's eyes, the weasel furtiveness of Link Shuford, the increased insolence of big Drake Bemis. Under Laval's persuasive and beguiling tongue, lanky, hatchet-faced Lou Libbey was succumbing too, and even the quiet, level-headed young Kelleway was getting revolutionary ideas. Slim Renner didn't like it.

Until this drive Renner had enjoyed Pete Laval's company on the range and trail, in the bunkhouse and in town. Laval had roamed extensively, he talked well of places and people, he had a wry insight into life and a pleasing sense of humor. But now Laval had changed suddenly, hardened into a scheming stranger. Renner was far from satisfied with his own lot in life, but this plot of Pete Laval was too traitorous and murderous to meet his approval.

The Madigans had always treated Renner well. He admired the old colonel, and he rather liked the pleasant unassuming son. Renner was not fond of Cabaniss, Alsobrine and Gilkeson, but he did like old Jessop and Needle Vereen, Wylie Winfield, Fritz Ullmer and devil-may-care Yancey Tarver . . . Even Renner couldn't see lifting a gun against men he had

worked and fought beside, shared danger and fun with. It went against his grain and he told Laval so.

Laval smiled sadly and shook his head. "You're a good boy, Slim, but you ain't very bright. When the payoff comes it'll be as simple as choosin' between life and death. In fact, it will be just that and nothin' more."

"That's not always so simple," Renner drawled. "Not for some men, Pete."

Laval laughed. "Sure, there are men brainless enough to die for a big-hearted outfit that pays them a dollar a day, feeds them on sowbelly, beans, trail-killed beef and hard-rock biscuits. Men who accept slavery as their place in life. Men like old Jesse, Vereen, squarehead Ullmer, Winfield, whose only brag is how hard he's worked."

"They're pretty good men," Renner said quietly.

Laval snorted in disgust. "They don't know any more'n the critters they ride herd on!"

Slim Renner shrugged his wide shoulders. Pete Laval spat and dropped back on the swing to work beside young Kelleway.

As the breach grew and the lines formed, Renner saw that the men he favored and respected most were clinging to the Madigan Bar-M standard. It was the renegades that Pete Laval gathered, the ugly and vicious, the envious and jealous-minded, the outcasts and enemies of society. But Kelleway was drifting toward Laval's group, and Kell had been Slim's friend since childhood. Slim also retained a liking for Pete Laval, even though he hated what Pete was doing.

Wrenched and torn between two conflicting forces and loyalties, Slim Renner drove on through the days of blasting sun and searing winds, completely miserable, the spring turned sour and spoiled for him.

Bedded down for the night the herd formed a ragged circle, a quarter-mile in circumference, with riders skirting the rim, singing low, plaintive songs to soothe the cattle. The off-duty men lingered about Needle Vereen's cookfire near the wagon, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes in the fitful reddish light.

Needle Vereen cocked his wild gray head, a blackened pipe sticking out of his wizened face. "Somethin' in the air. We been havin' it too easy and peaceful. I smell a storm comin'. It'll be a heller when it breaks."

THE others studied the sky. The night air was hushed, heavy and oppressive. It had been dry and rainless all the way up into northern Texas. A storm was due. Yancey Tarver laughed and said, "What I like about Needle, he's always so bright and cheerful. A regular little old sunbeam, Needle is!"

Needle Vereen grunted. "I look life in the face. It ain't no bower of ramblin' roses. A good blow-up might help this outfit. It's goin' stale, beginnin' to dry rot. Somethin' smells on this trip."

"Your cookin' maybe," suggested Sax Scobel with a sneer.

Vereen eyed the young gunhand with contempt. "You wouldn't notice any odor. A skunk never does, Scobel."

Scobel straightened off the wagon wheel he'd been leaning on. "Watch your tongue, old-timer!" he warned.

Doak Cabaniss reared up from his bedroll, a great red giant of a man, his voice lashing like a quirt: "Shut your fool mouth, Scobel!"

Scobel stared sullenly, mouth working but silent, and lounged back against the wheel. Ace Alsobrine had idled forward into the firelight, thumbs hooked casually in his belt, and Big Hod Gilkeson had lumbered up beside Cabaniss, mighty arms akimbo. Teel Bradder, the other rider who was more gunman than cowhand, drifted alongside of his partner Scobel, and Drake Bemis stood solid and massive, his face ugly and scornful as he glared across the fire at the three leaders.

"So?" Bemis said. "Insults are supposed to go only one way here?"

Alsobrine, slender, cool, poised, almost elegant even on the trail, spoke in his lazy slurring voice: "We ain't blind on the point. We know somebody in this crew's cravin' trouble. Whoever it is better know that we're ready, that's all."

"Let's forget it now," young Hal Madigan said, uncomfortable and embarrassed. "There's trouble enough ahead without stirrin' up any among ourselves."

"Right you are, Hal," said old Needle Vereen. "My tongue gets away from me

at times, downright poison mean. I meant nothin', Scobel. I'm just sensitive about my cookin', I reckon."

Everybody laughed a little and the tension eased off somewhat, but Renner had an unpleasant feeling of foreboding. He hadn't realized that everyone knew there was something wrong, that subversive forces at work. Pete Laval better soft pedal and go slow for a spell. Cabaniss, Gilkeson and Alsobrine had handled too many crews to be unaware of brewing mutiny. Pete should have been present to witness this, but he was out on guard, paired with the veteran Texan, Wylie Winfield.

There was no unsaddling that night with the air full of ominous electric storm warnings. The men rolled in blankets and tarps on the ground, riatas tied to wrists and the ends fixed to saddle-horns, ready to hit leather at an instant's notice. It was far from comfortable but they were tired enough to sleep.

The storm struck with shocking suddenness and fury. Lightning split the sky from end to end, and thunder fell reverberating in staggered booming crashes. Torrents of windblown rain cascaded to lash and drench the earth, and the night was ripped and torn with the raw primeval savagery of the elements. Lightning, blinding blue-white and green-white, cracked the heavens apart in long, jagged flares and streaks, the rain roared down like a vast waterfall, and thunder rocked the world with tremendous toppling volleys. And lightning played weirdly on the long horns of the steers, blooming vividly, flitting from one horned head to another in fantastic spurts and flashes, until terror swept the herd into a senseless surging avalanche of fear-crazed flight.

"Stampede!" The dreaded cry came as Slim Renner and the others, buffeted by wind and rain, fought their way out of sodden blankets and stumbled to their horses. Already the terrible rumble of hoofs was obscuring the storm noises, dulling even the thunderbolts. Lurid bursts of unearthly light flamed over a boiling tossing heaving sea of horned cattle, panicked and maddened, hurled into wild headlong motion.

The night guards, riding at first for their very lives and then bearing in to try to check the rush of beef, fired their guns, lashed quirts and ropes into the faces of the rampaging herd. Slim Renner, driving his mustang at full speed with the others, wondered if Kelleway, Pete Laval, old Wylie Winfield, and the other night-riders had escaped that first overwhelming plunge of many thousands of tons of beef. If a horse faltered, lost its footing or stepped into a hole, the rider was lost, trampled immediately to death, mashed and pulped to jelly.

Ahead of Slim a few riders were slanting daringly in against the lead steers. Old Fritz Ullmer, young Yancey Tarver, and Jessop . . . Ace Alsobrine, Doak Cabaniss, and young Hal Madigan himself. Quartering across the front of the pack, screaming their throats raw, shooting and slashing at the brute-faces, giving to the irresistible force but bending the herd slowly, firmly, desperately, into a long thunderous turn. "Wind 'em up, boys! Loop 'em back and roll 'em tight!"

Unlimbering his own Colt .44, Slim Renner swung in to help turn the horde, firing until the gun was empty, then striking out with his riata, the hot breath of death from the herd beating into his face as he rode. The rain had slackened now, the thunder and lightning died away, but the cattle were still running free, yielding only little to the pressure of horsemen. On the far side other riders crowded into the flank to further the circular motion started at the point. "Bend 'em, break 'em, barrel 'em up!"

Riding and fighting like maniacs, shooting down lead steers now, Cabaniss, Alsobrine, Madigan, Ullmer, Jessop and Tarver finally turned the drive, and kept it turning, death always at their elbows. Slim Renner, hurtling along with Gilkeson, Hornaday, Bemis and Halberstaldt, smashed in to hold the curving bucking line, as the point was forced gradually back until it came upon the tail end of the drag. A few bunches of cattle whirled off into the night but there was no time to waste on them. The main herd was milling now in a great broken circle, and the stampede was over. Let them mill it out.

HAL MADIGAN and Doak Cabaniss made a complete circuit to see if any men were missing. The hands who

had been riding night-herd returned with them, and Slim Renner was relieved to see Kelleway, Pete Laval, Libbey, and Price Pollard—but not Wylie Winfield. Kelleway's boyish face looked ghastly in the light of the fire Vereen was kindling from his stock of dry wood.

"I can't see Wylie gettin' throwed off any horse," Doak Cabaniss said. "If the horse'd gone down that'd be different, but I can't figure old Wylie gettin' unseated."

"Maybe the horse did go down," Laval said.

"We didn't find any horse," Cabaniss growled. "There wouldn't been much left, of course, but more of the horse than there was of Wylie."

"It started awful quick, Doak," mumbled Price Pollard. "I almost went under myself."

"There's no use talkin' about it, Doak," Madigan said. "We all feel bad enough."

"It still looks damn' funny to me," Cabaniss grumbled. "The best rider of the bunch thrown and trampled to death. And nobody saw it."

"Laval was closest to Wylie," Pollard put in.

"I didn't see it, though," Laval said. "I was kinda busy myself about then."

"All right, Laval," said Cabaniss. "You and Price take a tarp and bring Wylie in."

Kelleway dismounted near Renner and stood with his sick face bowed against the pommel. Renner stepped down and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Buck up, Kell. These things happen."

Kelleway raised his head and looked at his friend with horror-stricken eyes, shaking his head in a slow-dazed fashion.

"I couldn't tell for sure, Slim," he whispered. "But I think Pete knocked Winfield outa the saddle. I think Pete hit him over the head with his gun, just as it started."

Slim Renner felt a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach, and then a wave of nausea. His fingers bit deeply into Kelleway's shoulder. He knew Kell wouldn't have mentioned it if he hadn't been sure . . . It was as if Slim himself saw it happening in a quick ethereal flare of lightning. Laval had started and he would go on until somebody or something stopped him.

"There's Wylie's gelding," Fritz Ullmer said dully, as a riderless horse trotted in toward the group about the fire. He and Wylie Winfield had been saddlemates for twenty years, Renner recalled. "If Wylie fell off that horse," Ullmer went on, "he must've had a stroke or somethin'. No horse ever throwed old Wylie."

The rain started again, slower now but steady and lasting, pouring relentlessly down from the black sky. A rain to last for days.

CHAPTER TWO

Boothill's Tally is High

THE Red River was up when they reached it, swollen brown and turgid, racing and spreading over crumbling banks, spuming angry white in the narrows, bearing uprooted trees and tossing driftwood, a great torrential floodtide of water after the rains. The herd was bunched on the bed grounds, and grave, bearded, trail-gaunt men studied the river at twilight. There was a deadline to meet in Abilene, before the price dropped from twenty-five dollars to twenty dollars a head. A loss of fifteen thousand dollars if they were late.

Doak Cabaniss was for making a night crossing, even if the riders were exhausted and beaten, the cattle worn sullen and troublesome. Hod Gilkeson sided with Doak, but after some deliberation Hal Madigan and Ace Alsobrine opposed them. Doak Cabaniss began to bluster and curse, twisting his red head in impatient disgust, but young Madigan cut him short with a quiet sentence:

"We'll cross in the mornin', Doak."

Wrapped in his blanket beside Kelleway that night, Slim Renner observed Pete Laval in late conference with Sax Scobel, Teel Bradder, Link Shuford, and Drake Bemis, long after the others had retired. Heavy with premonition about tomorrow's crossing, Slim was unable to get to sleep for hours, even though drugged with weariness.

In the gray morning before sunrise the mist-shrouded stream looked even higher and rougher, more turbulent and treacherous. The veteran hands perceived that

there would be losses in this crossing, and likely of men as well as animals, but Cabaniss was getting ready to start the drive. Skillfully he lured out a big lead steer, built his point with the aid of Alsobrine and Madigan, and led on to the low bank, jumping his horse into the swift swirling water. The lead steer splashed after him, the others followed, and swing riders harried the main body of the trail herd forward.

"Keep 'em comin'!" Cabaniss bellowed like a bull from the river.

Alsobrine, Madigan on one side, Gilkeson and Ullmer on the other, steered the cattle into the water, lashing at the balky ones. "Hi-yaaah! Git along, dogie! Git along there, steer!" Doak's black stallion was swimming now, the front animals were swimming. Alsobrine and Madigan took to the water to keep them headed up-stream. Slim Renner and Kelleway moved up from swing to feed cows into the river. The herd was moving fast now, and the men were sweating hard in the chill grayness. Old Jessop and his crew shoved the drag along at a good gait. "Git along, cow critters! Git along, you steers!"

Swimming steers were strung across the raging water in a long ragged U-shaped arc. Cabaniss dropped back to help Madigan and Alsobrine hold the flank, shouting for more men. Slim Renner and Kelleway put their mounts over the bank and splashed out to keep that loop of beef intact. The current was strong, dragging them down-stream, and the great U deepened slowly but did not break.

The foremost steers reached the shallows on the other side and lunged on toward shore. The river seemed full of swimming cattle and more poured in constantly as Jessop brought up the drag. Other riders took to the water, now that momentum was assured, and the desperate fight to hold that long irregular cross-current arc went on, the men on the strong courageous horses soaked to the armpits. Cattle were clambering out on the other bank now, with Doak Cabaniss and his point men pushing in to drive them away from the shoreline and leave room for the others. Men against animals, snarling, cursing, straining.

YELLING, flailing at horned heads and snouts, Slim Renner and Kelleway were well beyond mid-stream now, battling to maintain that deep-sagging U against the current and the untold tons of beef. Driftwood was hurtling through now, small stuff that panicked the herd and increased the pressure on the swimming horsemen, but did no serious damage. Until Slim Renner's mount found bottom and a high-pitched scream went up in mid-river. "Bust 'em up! Let that log through!"

A huge tree trunk was moving toward the struggling mass of cattle. Fritz Ullmer, Yancey Tarver, Gilkeson and others strove to break the line and let the timber through, but the line refused to give. The riders scattered as the tree butt broke a steer's back, lifted another half out of water, and transformed the bottom of the arc into a weltering maelstrom, with steers locking horns, fighting and climbing over one another, milling and thrashing in a terrible whirlpool of bodies. The water boiled frothing white over the turmoil.

Pete Laval was on the outer edge of it, and Slim Renner watched him narrowly. The base of the U was gone now, the embroiled and stricken cattle swept down-stream. Ullmer and Gilkeson barely escaped going under with them. Yancey Tarver was driving frantically for safety when he collided with another floundering horseman—Sax Scobel. They were momentarily entangled, lost in splashed sheets of water. Then Scobel broke away to the outside, the safe side, and Tarver was left lurching back into the path of the crazed brutes. His horse screamed as a longhorn caught it, and Yancey Tarver spun out of sight in a chaos of hooking horns, slashing hoofs and wallowing bodies, down under the churning surface.

Fritz Ullmer tried to throw his horse in there after Yancey, but old Jessop blocked him off, knowing there was nothing to be done for Tarver now. Letting the lost steers go, the riders labored to form another line and drive it across, and somehow they broke the milling cattle and lashed them onward. Slim Renner and Kelleway, still frozen with horror, went back to join the savage skirmish, and Doak Cabaniss came ploughing out on his black stud, a roaring red-headed monster. They

swung an arc and managed to hold it.

Renner noticed with vague surprise that the sun was well up, the forenoon bright, hot and well-advanced, and hours had passed in turmoil and strife. Cattle were still spilling into the stream and swarming across in a long uneven loop. Men and horses were still fighting the current and the steers, but the worst of it seemed to be over. "Keep 'em comin'! Keep 'em rollin'! Git along, steer!"

It was still going on at noon and long after. The chuck wagon had been floated across on lashed timbers, and Needle Vereen had his fire burning on the far shore. Drenched and battered riders pulled up at the wagon to grab slices of beef and gulp steaming coffee before splashing back into watery battle. Hornaday swam his remuda over, and men paused occasionally to switch horses.

The afternoon burned on and the last of the herd, Jessop's drag, was in the river at last. Chance threw Fritz Ullmer alongside of Sax Scobel on the flank, and Ullmer's temper, frayed thin by the deaths of Winfield and Tarver, flared out as he looked at the sullen dead-panned young gunsharp.

"The good men die," Ullmer said. "The ones like you live."

Scobel's full lips curled. "Button up if you want to live, old man."

"You got in the way, Scobel," said Ullmer. "Or Yancey'd be alive and sound here. You threw him off to save yourself."

SAX SCOBEL lashed out viciously with his quirt, striking it full across Ullmer's square-jawed face. Ullmer swayed in the saddle, his mount reared in the water, and Fritz fell sideways toward the herd. The near cattle, startled by the crack of the whip, were plunging crazily, breaking toward the horsemen. Ullmer landed heavily on a thrusting horned head, and one needle-sharp horn passed clear through his body. The steer tossed him free, flying into the air, bouncing along broad wet backs, sliding at last into the seething water, disappearing under the drag of the herd.

Sax Scobel swam his horse quickly away toward the opposite bank. Other riders drove in to hold the U and keep the line flowing, their bitter eyes following Scobel's back, their taut mouths cursing him.

"That was murder!" old Jessop panted. "Scobel dies for that."

"He'll die all right," giggled Fish Finley. "Doak's waitin' for him over there."

Doak Cabaniss was waiting on the embankment, towering, red-haired, his rugged face set cold and bleak as a death-mask. "Come here, Scobel!" he commanded, as the man pulled out of the water. "Get off that horse."

Sax Scobel stepped down, wet and shivering slightly, his tough face starting to disintegrate. "Fritz called me a name that no man takes," he muttered, looking to Laval and Bemis for support.

"Two men died today on your account," Cabaniss said. "Two good men. And in one case, at least, it was deliberate. Your life ain't enough to balance things, Scobel. But it's all you got, and I'm takin' it."

Scobel's beady gaze flickered about like that of a trapped animal, but every man there avoided his eyes, even Pete Laval and Drake Bemis.

Scobel's full lips writhed and veins corded his red neck. "Doak, you can't," Scobel panted. "My gun's wet, Doak."

"Give him a dry gun, somebody," ordered Cabaniss.

Nobody stirred in response. Cabaniss yanked out his left-hand gun and threw it on the grass at Scobel's feet. "That one's dry. Pick it up, Scobel."

"This is murder, Doak," Scobel moaned.

"I'll wait till you get hold of it," Cabaniss said. "Come on, Scobel. You're supposed to be hell with a gun."

Sax Scobel stooped warily, eyes on the big man, snatched at the gun, fired one wild shot as he brought it up. Doak Cabaniss drew easily and shattered Scobel's right arm with the first slug. The second smashed Scobel's shoulder and he screamed as the impact whirled and jolted him back. Doak's Colt flamed once more and Scobel dropped, the final bullet through his heart.

"Anybody don't like this?" Doak Cabaniss said, eyes sweeping the ring of men, lingering on Pete Laval, Link Shuford and Teel Bradder, who had just ridden up

the bank. Nobody answered, nobody moved.

Then young Hal Madigan said, "I don't like it, Doak. But it was necessary. It was justified."

The crossing was completed fifteen minutes later, the herd bunched on the flats north of the Red River. Texas was behind them now, and four men had died.

"Not much chance of findin' Yancey and Fritz," Cabaniss said. "We'll bury this one. Rest tonight, sleep late tomorrow and then move along."

NORTHWEST into the Nations they drove. Most of the buffalo were gone, but the Indians remained, sometimes friendly and again hostile, depending on their moods and needs as well as the strength of the white forces to be engaged. They were apt to be warlike when they saw only seventeen men with an immense herd of cattle. There were scattered bands from many tribes in the Nations. Besides the Apaches and Comanches, there were Cherokees, Osages, Kiowas, Choctaws, and Chickasaws.

The country was more broken and irregular, with crooked ridges, timbered mountains and hills, strange sculptured formations and towers of colored stone, red rock buttes and mesas. But there were great broad valleys too, where the buffalo had run, watered by the Canadian, Washita, Cimarron, and Arkansas Rivers. Northwest the herd plodded, unfurling its endless cloud-banner of dust, an amber haze in the golden heat of the sun.

Pete Laval thought things were working out very well thus far. Three of the enemy were gone, three who would have been dangerous in a fight: Wylie Winfield, Yancey Tarver and Fritz Ullmer. He had lost one man through Sax Scobel's hot-headed rashness. But anyone that foolish deserved to die. Lavel had feared for an instant, as Scobel stood before Doak Cabaniss, that Scobel was going to spill his guts. If Cabaniss had been smart he could have wrung the whole plot out of Sax, but Cabaniss was simple and direct, a man of action, forthright and honest like Slim Renner. Such men were handicapped when they faced someone devious like Pete Laval.

Scobel's death, needless as it was, had served one purpose for Laval. It had turned Teel Bradder into a living instrument of hate and revenge. Bradder had been bitter in his condemnation of Laval and the others for letting Cabaniss shoot Scobel dead in front of their eyes. Patiently, calmly, Laval explained that the time hadn't been right, it was way too early, and striking then would have been disastrous to them and their plot.

"The odds were bad too," Laval reminded him. "Cabaniss had Madigan, Alsobrine, Gilkeson, Vereen, and Hornaday right there waitin'. There were only three of us, Teel, and you came late."

Slim Renner and Kelleway were avoiding Laval these days, and Pete figured he had lost those two, but he didn't consider it too grave a loss. Kelleway wasn't much of a fighter, and Renner was confused and bewildered lately.

With a shortage of swing riders Doak Cabaniss and Hod Gilkeson fell back to help work the swing, one on either flank, while Lou Libbey and Teel Bradder sometimes moved up from the drag. Pete Laval was careful to be pleasant and polite to the leaders, content to bide his time until the Indians struck or some other opening appeared to leave the Madigan party vulnerable.

The drive was progressing smoothly again, but not for Slim Renner, who rode always torn with inner doubts, dread and dissension, unhappy at the change in Laval, the loss of a friend there. Strive as he might, Slim could decide on no course of procedure. Winfield's death had perhaps been accidental, Tarver's was certainly by accident more than intent, and Ullmer had fallen because of Scobel's temper.

In fairness Slim couldn't place the blame on Pete Laval, and yet he felt that Pete was fundamentally at fault in all three cases. Well, there was nothing Renner could do but watch and wait, and all the while his own life was in danger. Slim realized, without understanding, that Laval would stop at nothing.

"I'm beginnin' to smell Comanches," said Needle Vereen, and Yancey Tarver wasn't there this time to remark laughingly on the cook's cheerful nature. "I got a nose for trouble. They'll be hittin'

us before long. We better take care!"

Old Jessop shifted his tobacco and grinned up at the wizened man on the wagon seat. "You're a buzzard, Needle. You smell death before it comes."

"Ain't it the truth?" Vereen said morosely. "It makes for an unhappy life too, Jesse. A life of downright misery and sorrow."

LATE that afternoon the point and swing riders all smelled death and saw the vultures circling and plummeting over the valley ahead. The odor of charred timber mingled with the stench of decay. A bend in the valley brought it into view, and the front riders hauled out their carbines to drive the evil-headed rawnecked carrion birds flapping away.

Three burned-out blackened wagons sagged in the trail, surrounded by the bloated arrow-studded carcasses of horses and mules. One man, mutilated, had been staked out over a slow fire. Another sprawled nearby, bristling with feathered shafts, scalp gone, hands and feet chopped off. Four more men, two scarcely more than boys, hung on the scorched wagon wheels they had been lashed to, disfigured and burned beyond semblance of humanity. Beneath one Conestoga lay the bodies of an old woman and a small child, both scalped and hacked beyond belief. The younger women apparently had been taken captives to fare even worse than those left behind.

Hard-bitten riders from Texas turned aside from this spectacle, and some leaned from the saddle and were violently sick. Hal Madigan and Ace Alsobrine turned the point aside in a wide bend to by-pass the ruins, and the riders kept an alert watch over the unnerved beasts, snorting and bawling at the stink. There was no time to stop for burial and nothing much left to bury, for that matter. . . The drive went on, men's keen eyes scanning the ridges and hills that walled the valley. Behind them, the buzzards swooped down again to finish their revolting feast, and the drag riders fired back into the evil greedy swarm until Jessop cautioned them against wasting ammunition.

That night they bedded the herd down in a box canyon and posted a double guard. The Indians weren't likely to attack at night but they might attempt to stampede the cattle. Early in the morning the Comanches, bloodlust up from the wagon-train massacre, came howling down from the mist-fogged hills. A thin line of seventeen men was strung across the canyon mouth to meet them, lying behind boulders, logs, tree trunks, and the wagon, which centered the defense.

The warriors, some stripped half-naked and daubed grotesquely with clay-paint, others buckskin clad and feathered, came hurtling in on their fleet ponies, yipping insanely, unleashing flights of arrows, lances and rifleshots.

Slim Renner, sharing a clump of rocks near the wagon with Kelleway, felt fear strike him, iceing his spine and tightening his scalp, drying his throat and numbing his limbs. Resisting an almost overpowering impulse to run back into the canyon among the horses and cattle, Slim braced himself behind the boulder and sighted along his Sharps rifle barrel at the onrushing horsemen.

FLAME leaped out in a solid roaring sheet along the line, shattering that first mad charge. Ponies cartwheeled and reared up screaming, brown bodies toppled or flew through space to bounce in the dust, and the assault scattered and broke into retreat. Except for one screaching spearhead of riders that came thundering on toward the high-bodied chuck wagon. Slim Renner lined his carbine that way and fired as fast as he could lever fresh shells into the chamber. Braves and horses went down in spectacular plunging falls but others came on.

The crouching Texans at the wagon—old Needle Vereen, young Hal Madigan, red Doak Cabaniss, swift Ace Alsobrine, and huge Hod Gilkeson—poured murder-out riflefire into the careening Comanches. But the suicidal onslaught never stopped until the last three survivors crashed head-on into the side of the wagon, and died in a frenzied welter there as Vereen, Cabaniss and Gilkeson rose into the open to meet and blast them from their bare-backed perches.

In a dying defiant gesture one snarling young buck hurled his lance as he went down. Hod Gilkeson's breath went out in a swooshing gasp as the spear smashed

into his chest and went through, the point protruding a foot behind Gilkeson's back as he reeled from the shock, dropped groaning to his knees, and stretched out on his side in under the tailgate. They dragged him to the inner side of the wagon, but there was no hope for the big man.

Hod knew it as well as they did. "Cut —the—damn thing—out—Doak," Gilkeson panted.

Cabaniss slashed off the barbed head. Vereen and Alsobrine pulled the shaft from his body. "Thanks," Gilkeson said. "Give—'em—hell." Blood broke from his lips and the massive body fell back. Cursing, the others returned their attention to the Indians outside the canyon. The attackers had withdrawn to fire at long range for a time. Brown bodies and dead ponies littered the plain.

"There're liable to climb a few braves into the canyon back there and stampede our herd right over our heads," Needle Vereen grumbled.

"I'll send old Jesse back with a couple of men," Doak Cabaniss said. "That's what the red hellhounds'll do if they think of it."

Cabaniss walked along both flanks, checking for further wounded, finding none. Pausing at Jessop's position behind a deadfall he said, "Jesse, take two men back to the end of the canyon. They might try to slip down that way and set the herd runnin'."

"I been thinkin' about that," Jessop said. "Had me some worried, Doak. Who'll I take?"

"Don't matter much, Jesse. Anybody that can shoot straight." Cabaniss glanced at the men sheltered in the scrub oaks. "There's Libbey—and Laval. The others can hold that stand."

Slim Renner was suddenly there beside them. "I—I'll go with Jesse," he said. "Instead of Laval."

Cabaniss shook his head. "Need you up front, Slim. You was mowin' 'em down pretty last time I noticed."

"But—" Slim started to protest.

"Go on back with Kell," Cabaniss said. "They'll be comin' at us again in a minute."

Jessop was already moving toward the trees to pick up Libbey and Laval. For a moment Slim stood staring after him, then turned and walked back to his rockpile to the left of the wagon. He couldn't protest without condemning Pete Laval, and he didn't have enough evidence to convict Pete. He wasn't sure how Libbey stood, but he doubted if Lou would tolerate murder. Maybe Jesse was safe with those two.

"Here they come, boys!" It was Ace Alsobrine's clear voice from the wagon.

CHAPTER THREE

Back-Shootin' Rebel

SLIM RENNER slid into a kneeling position behind his boulder and laid his lean right cheek against the smooth worn stock of the old Sharps .50, his left hand dumping shells on the turf within easy reach. The Comanches came yelling in another blood-crazed outburst of fury, racing their ponies into the riflefire. It looked as if there were hundreds of them. It seemed impossible that fifteen —no, only twelve now—twelve men could ever stop them, turn them back.

Then everything was lost in the flame and smoke and din of battle. There was nothing but those hurtling horses with the brown-skinned riders, trigger squeeze and the kick of the butt against the shoulder, lead screeching off stone, arrows swishing and clashing, the beat of hoofs, roar of guns, taste of powder. The sun rose red as Slim Renner reloaded quickly and hammered his shots once more into that copper-colored horde. The earth was strewn with dead horses and braves, but still they came driving in like yowling red demons. For fifteen blazing minutes there was no time to think of old Jesse or anything else but breaking the Comanche charges. Renner fired until the powder fumes choked him and the carbine barrel burned his hand.

Meanwhile the three men detailed to the rear guard had worked their way past the horses and through the restless herd to the dead-end of the canyon, Jessop taking one side, Lou Libbey and Pete Laval the other. They arrived just in time to see the down-slithering brown bodies silhouetted against the morning sky. Aiming carefully, firing almost simultaneous-

ly, they shot three Indians off the face of the broken cliff. Two bodies fell to the canyon floor, the third caught on a ledge above.

Old Jesse spat tobacco juice at the nearest corpse and peered up the craggy wall in search of other prowling savages. A rifle boomed behind him and a jarring hammerblow smashed him between the shoulders, lifting him three steps forward, dropping him to hands and knees. Stunned and paralyzed Jessop tried vainly to twist around and see where that bullet had come from, but his back was broken, he couldn't make it. Sighing wearily he collapsed face-down in the weeds.

Across the way Lou Libbey, a long knotty slab of a man, whirled on Pete Laval. "What you doin', for the love of God?" Libbey cried. "You must be crazy, man! What'd you kill old Jesse for?"

"He's one of 'em, a Madigan man," Laval said. "Are you goin' to keep your mouth shut, Libbey? Or do you want to get it, too?" Laval had transferred the rifle to his left elbow, his right hand swinging spread-fingered near the Colt sheathed on his thigh.

"Crazy!" panted Libbey. "Well, by—" He jerked his rifle around in a desperate effort to train it on the other man.

Pete Laval's right hand swept smoothly, down and up, level, and flame burst from it. Libbey rocked back on his heels, swayed from side to side, sat down heavily, awkwardly, gave up trying to hold his rifle and slumped backward to the ground.

The air hummed with the flight of an arrow. Looking up swiftly Laval saw the fourth Comanche and fired at him. Long range for a sixgun, but the brave doubled up, rolled over the rim and tumbled into the canyon. Laval smiled as he saw the arrow sticking out of Libbey's chest. That was lucky, fortune was with him, that would make it look good. . . .

He walked over to Jessop's body. Dragging the nearest dead Indian along he dropped the red corpse half-across Jessop, and taking the warrior's knife from his belt, Laval jabbed it into Jessop's back. There, that would make it look even better. . . Pete Laval started for the open end of the canyon where the battle still raged.

THE herd had started to run when the shooting broke out at the rear wall, but the fireworks at the mouth of the canyon had checked the lead steers and stopped the stampede before it was well begun. Now Doak Cabaniss' bull-like roar came to Laval above the gunfire and Indian cries:

"Jesse! Start the cattle movin' back there! Stampede 'em! Run 'em out here fast!"

Pete Laval understood instantly. The Comanches must be on the verge of overrunning the front line out there. As a final resort Doak wanted to stampede the herd against the Indians. The big redhead wasn't so dumb after all. Firing his rifle right-handed, working the Colt with his left hand, Laval emptied both weapons into the air, shouting and yelling at the drag steers, clubbing them with his guns.

The cattle lunged and bucked, surged ahead in the canyon. It started slowly, gradually, the movement spreading forward, growing steadily. And then they were off, the panic sweeping the herd into sudden frenzied flight, the earth trembling under the frantic beat of thousands on thousands of hoofs.

The long thin line of men up front had fallen back to gather and protect the rope-and-pole horse corral Hornaday had constructed in an offside bowl of the canyon wall. They had dragged Vereen's wagon as far that way as they could under fire. They stood there reloading or still shooting, and watched the thundering herd explode from the canyon mouth into those horrified Comanche faces, roaring straight over the first horsemen, routing the rest into wild scattered flight.

It saved the day, spread the surviving redmen for miles around the countryside, their losses so severe that they were unlikely to come back. But the Texans had not escaped unscathed. Jessop and Libbey were dead at the end of the canyon, and sour-faced Pine Halberstaldt had joined Hod Gilkeson in death at the entrance.

Only thirteen men were left to drive the Madigan beef to Kansas, and it took them two days to round up the herd after that stampede.

When they were burying their four dead Slim Renner seemed to take an unnatural interest in two of the bodies. He

knew that Gilkeson had got a lance through the chest, and that Halberstaldt had been shot in the throat. He wanted to see how old Jessop and Lou Libbey had died. What he found confirmed his suspicions. Jessop had been shot in the back, and the angle did not indicate it had come from above. Libbey had been shot at such close range that his shirt showed powder specks and a slight burn. Neither the knife wound in Jessop nor the arrowhole in Libbey had bled.

Slim turned away, bitterness biting through him, and saw Pete Laval standing there with hands on hips, dark head cocked jauntily to one side, a faint smile on his reckless face. The brown eyes regarded Slim with steady amusement and slight scorn.

"Just what I expected," Slim Renner said evenly, and walked away, knowing that Laval would kill him now at the first opportunity.

Slim thought, Why the hell didn't I speak up to Cabaniss? I knew Laval would come back alone. He murdered old Jesse and then he had to shoot Libbey to shut Lou's mouth. . . I could have stopped it but I didn't. I let it happen. Two more good men gone. . . Well, it won't happen again. I'll call Pete and kill him myself—if he doesn't get me in the back first.

The drive went on toward the Cherokee Strip, thirteen riders where there had been twenty-one, eight men and some two hundred steers missing. Short-handed and behind schedule, they had to work doubly hard, and it was well they did for in their scant leisure moments they were like a funeral delegation. And various men eyed certain others with suspicion, fear and hatred, that swelled intensely with the miles.

There was no good feeling left in the crew, and the strain told on them all. Slim Renner, watching Laval like a hawk, wished that Pete would give him some excuse to throw a gun and get it over with. The suspense was wearing, fretting, nerve-racking, nearly unbearable.

"THEY'RE workin' us to death to save Madigan fifteen thousand dollars," Pete Laval said. "What do we gain by beatin' that deadline? Not a damn thing, men. We still get our dollar a day."

The odds weren't right yet, Laval recognized. He had lost two men that he'd been counting on, Libbey and Halberstaldt, in the fight with the Comanches. Pete had only three followers left: vengeful Teel Bradder, rough, hungry-eyed Drake Bemis, and sleek weasel-like Link Shuford. Fish Finley was still on the fence. . . With Renner and Kelleway they would have been secure in the driver's seat. Well, Pete Laval thought, if I can't get Renner on this side I'll have to kill him, that's all.

The Madigan men numbered six, with Price Pollard remaining loyal as yet. Hal had brawny red-headed Doak Cabaniss, cool debonair Ace Alsobrine, Needle Vereen, the cook, and Horse Hornaday, the wrangler. And in a showdown he would also have Renner and Kelleway. Those odds would have to be reduced before they hit the Arkansas.

One moonlight night in the Strip Slim Renner, sleep eluding him for hours, crawled out of his blankets, strapped on his gun belt, and started walking around the perimeter of the bed ground. Only one guard was in sight and he wondered what was up, recalling that Laval, Teel Bradder and Link Shuford were supposed to be on duty at this time. Voices sounded in a dry arroyo ahead. Slim crept carefully to the edge and looked down into the dry wash.

Laval was sitting his horse there, and three other men were dismounted and standing before him. Teel Bradder held Finley's arms from behind, and Link Shuford stood sneering in front of the helpless man. As Slim watched, Shuford slashed his right hand back and forth viciously across Finley's face, the blows smacking sharply and Finley's head snapping from side to side.

"All right, all right," sobbed Fish Finley. "I'll do it. Lemme go, I'll do it!"

"Keep your voice down or I'll give you the knuckles!" threatened Link Shuford, brandishing a fist, while Bradder laughed and twisted on Finley's arms.

Laval leaned forward in the saddle, elbow on the pommel. "If you don't do it, Fish," he said, "what happened to them wagon-train men was a picnic compared to what you'll get. And if you talk I'll cut your tongue out—for a beginnin'."

"I'll do it, Pete," mumbled Finley. "I ain't talkin' to nobody." His head dropped and blood glistened darkly under his nose and mouth.

Link Shuford belted him once more for good measure, and Finley cried out in pain. Teel Bradder freed Finley's arms and tripped the bewildered man suddenly into a clumsy seated position on the ground. Slim Renner drew his Colt .44 and stepped to the brink of the gully.

"Three brave men!" Slim said clearly. "I oughta give it to you right here. Fish, get on your feet and grab their guns."

Finley sat there and shook his head despairingly. "I can't, Slim, I *can't* . . ."

Slim Renner swore softly. "All right then. Start reachin', you three, and put 'em up high."

"You must be sick of livin', Renner," said Pete Laval. "Why don't you run along and forget all about this? That way nothin'll happen to you Slim."

"Get 'em up!" Slim said, motioning with his gun. Slowly the three men raised their hands in the moonlit air. "Finley, come on up here," ordered Slim. "I want to talk to you. And make it quick!"

As Fish Finley clambered to his feet and started for the bank an outburst of shooting came from the far side of the circle, and somebody screamed, "Rustlers!" The cattle awoke, heaved upright, and began to move and sullenly mill about.

Slim Renner stood indecisively for a moment. "Work to do," he said then, whirling and running for the wagon. Shooting broke out in the arroyo and lead whined overhead as Slim ran. But Laval and his men wanted to save that herd as much as anyone did, and they turned to check the restless surge of cattle and look for the rustlers, letting Slim go.

As if in sudden after-thought, however, Laval reined up and yelled back to the two men who were swinging into their saddles. "Drop Finley before he blabs!" Fish Finley had just reached the top of the wash when Link Shuford opened fire with his sixgun, drilling Fish in the back. Finley threw up his arms, stiffened, and fell backward, sliding in a swirl of dust to the gully bottom.

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MADIGAN, Alsobrine, Cabaniss, Vereen and Hornaday were up and mounted when Renner reached camp and flung himself panting into the saddle. Swiftly they fanned out to hold the herd and seek the raiders. Far across the heaving mass of cattle guns were flashing as Price Pollard and Drake Bemis turned the rustlers' first thrust into a running fight away from the bed ground.

Pollard and Bemis had been lucky in the opening exchange of shots, emptying four saddles immediately, halting and scattering the rest of the attackers. With all their faults those two were fighters to the core, galloping out fearlessly to meet overwhelming numbers, firing until their carbines were spent, then ripping out their Colts to rake the enemy ranks, forcing the battle away from the herd.

The outlaws had expected no such resistance. When they saw reinforcements racing up on both sides of the perimeter, the Laval trio tearing around the right wing, the Madigan men slashing in from the left flank, the bandits broke in confusion and disorder. Fleeing for the hills they left six of the party behind, dead or dying on the prairie. And for some inexplicable reason the cattle had not stampeded. Always unpredictable, the animals that were sometimes stampeded by a single shot or a whipcrack, had failed to break away with a pitched battle going on nearby.

Price Pollard's horse had been shot from under him, and Drake Bemis was slightly wounded in the thigh. On the other side of the herd Fish Finley was lying dead in that gulch. It was incredible that the Texans had escaped so lightly, but the fact remained. . . . There was no more sleeping that night, but the raiders did not return.

Slim Renner couldn't make up his mind what to do. There were only twelve men left to drive the beef to market, and even the traitors were indispensable now. Every man was needed if they were to make it into Abilene. Slim finally concluded that the only solution at present was to keep his mouth closed and his eyes open, to postpone the inevitable free-for-all as long as possible. They were not far from the Arkansas River, and Slim figured that would be the logical spot for Pete Laval to show his hand and make his bid for the herd.

When Link Shuford reported that Fish Finley had been knocked down by a sniper's bullet before the real fight started, Slim Renner said nothing to contradict the lie. It occurred to Slim that the best way to preserve his own life and to keep peace until Abilene was near at hand, would be to pretend a sympathy for the Laval cause.

Pete Laval said, "You finally gettin' some sense, Slim? I sure hope so. I was hatin' the idea of havin' to kill you."

"Maybe I am," said Slim Renner. "I ain't anxious to die, Pete. And I could use a little prosperity as well as anybody."

"I'm still watchin' you," Laval warned. "But I won't let anythin' happen to you unless you try to cross us."

"Hell, if I wanted to cross you, Pete," said Slim, "all I got to do is tell 'em you boys shot Finley. And I could tell 'em about some others, too."

"Don't do it, boy," warned Laval. "If you want to stay whole and healthy."

"If I was goin' to speak my piece I would've done it by now."

"I figured that, Slim. But I feel better to hear you say so yourself. Just set tight and quiet, boy. We'll be rich men in Kansas."

"I'd sure like a spread of my own."

"You can have one, Slim," promised Pete Laval. "Just string along with me, kid."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Last Gun

THE night came when they camped on the south bank of the Arkansas River, and beyond the northern shoreline the plains of Kansas stretched flatly toward Abilene. Needle Vereen built his cookfire in a boulder-screened basin, and the riders hunkered down to their beans and beef, biscuits and coffee.

"I been on a lot of drives," said Needle Vereen, scratching his wild gray head. "But nary a one to equal this. Ever since we lit out from the Bar-M I've had the feelin' a man gets when he's bedded down in the company of snakes. And more things has gone wrong, more men died

than a dozen drives oughta kill. Wylie Winfield thrown and tromped on. Yancey Tarver drowned under the herd. Fritz Ullmer plain murdered, and Scobel gettin' a bullet that was too good for him. Then the Comanches hit us and downed four, 'though to my mind there was somethin' odd about Jessop and Libbey. . . Then poor Finley, the second one shot in the back. . . It sure is way and above the worst damned drive I ever was on!"

"Luck piles up," Doak Cabaniss said. "It comes in bunches, the good and the bad. Maybe we was too lucky in other years, Needle."

"Well, it's damn sure evened up now, if we was," said the cook. "Nine men dead and twelve of us left."

"We only lost a couple hundred and some head, if that's any consolation," Ace Alsobrine said.

"*That,*" said Pete Laval, "is all that matters to some people."

Young Madigan flushed under his tan, and Alsobrine eyed Laval coldly. "I don't like your words, mister. Or the way you say them."

"Sorry," Laval said hastily. "Didn't mean anythin', Ace."

Hornaday said, "Even the horses act skittish all the time. Like somethin's spookin' 'em, somethin' mighty bad."

Drake Bemis laughed. "Evil spirits, Horse? Ghosts and ghouls and such critters maybe?"

Hornaday regarded him unabashed. "That's the most truth you've spoke all the way up, mister."

Bemis turned ugly. "Are you callin' me a liar?"

Doak Cabaniss stood up, towering, red-headed, rock-faced in the firelight. "If he was he wouldn't be lyin' any himself," Doak said. "You're gettin' big for your britches, Bemis. You been honin' for trouble quite a spell now."

Drake Bemis grunted. "You men can insult us all you want. We ain't supposed to answer back."

"What's that 'you, us and we' business," drawled Ace Alsobrine. "I thought we were all together here."

"Let's cut this out, boys," Hal Madigan said. "We're in the home stretch now."

"One rotten apple spoils the lot," muttered Horse Hornaday, eyes flickering at Pete Laval as he left the fireside and strolled away toward his remuda.

In the morning they found Horse Hornaday's wiry bowlegged body, stabbed in a dozen places, mutilated and scalped on the riverbank.

"Hell's hinges!" Doak Cabaniss snarled. "There's no Indians around here. They don't come by night anyway, and if they did they wouldn't stop at one man."

The crew gathered gloomily for breakfast, tense and stark in the misty grayness of morning, glancing at one another with fearful suspicion, avoiding each other's eyes, talking little or not at all. . . Here it comes, Slim Renner thought. This is what's been brewing all the way up from the Rio Grande to the Red River to the Arkansas. It can't go on, it ends here, one way or another.

"There's a killer in this bunch," Cabaniss said grimly. "By God, we've got a killer here and it's past time to flush him out!"

Needle Vereen raised his thin deep-lined face from the fire. "Ask Shuford why he changed clothes this mornin', Doak. Ask Shuford why he was cleanin' that knife so careful?"

Every eye turned on the narrow-peaked coyote-face of Link Shuford, and the shifty-eyed man went livid with terror. "No, no!" he gasped. "Don't look at me. That ain't *my* knife! That's—"

Flame streaked across the smoking fire as a sixgun shattered the gray morning. Link Shuford gasped and moaned, shrinking to a scarecrow inside his clothes, wagging his head as his knees wobbled loose, falling into a limp lifeless sprawl. Pete Laval calmly holstered his smoking revolver, dark reckless face without expression.

"What's the idea, Laval?" demanded Cabaniss. "Afraid to let him talk?"

"He's a murderer," Pete Laval said flatly.

"And so are you, Pete," said Slim Renner, striding forward, brushing men aside with either arm, standing tall and limber before Laval, long arms elbowing out a trifle, the fingers of his right hand spread wide.

"So, you do wanta die, Renner?" said

Pete Laval coolly. "So you ask for it!"

"Let me take him, kid," said Ace Alsobrine.

"Watch the others, Ace," Slim Renner told him. "This one's mine."

"Can't somebody stop this?" cried young Hal Madigan.

"No," Doak Cabaniss said. "Let 'em go, Hal."

THE onlookers shifted warily out of line, watching one another as well as the two men in the middle. Powerful Drake Bemis and tough-faced Teel Bradder drifted toward Pete Laval, three of them at bay now, desperate and dangerous as cornered wolves.

Old Needle Vereen and young Kelleway were without gun belts, weaponless, and Price Pollard was still bedded in the wagon, infection having set into his wounded thigh. That left four men to face the three rebels: Hal Madigan, Cabaniss, Alsobrine and Slim Renner.

"The odds are still bad," Pete Laval remarked with a trace of his old whimsical spirit.

Doak Cabaniss waved Madigan back, and the boy said, "All right, I'll stay out of it."

"Satisfied?" drawled Alsobrine.

"I want Cabaniss!" grated Teel Bradder, straining like a leashed tiger, glaring his hate and fury at the big red-headed foreman.

"Alsobrine's reputation ain't scarin' me any," Drake Bemis said, standing wide-legged, massive and solid, unafraid.

Paired off now the three sets of opponents spread out to afford ample room in the rock-girded basin by the river, waiting as if by common consent for the two in the center to make the first move.

"Looks like I drew the easy one," Pete Laval said, teeth shining white in his dark smooth face.

"I should've killed you long ago, Pete," said Slim Renner. "I guess I couldn't believe how rotten you were."

Pete Laval shook his dark glossy head regretfully. "Too bad you picked the wrong side, Slim."

"Let's go," Slim said.

"Here's luck," grinned Pete Laval, and his right hand flashed.

Slim Renner hitched lithely to the left and his right hand flipped up with the Colt .44, thumbing off a shot a split-second before Laval's gun boomed and spurted fire. The muzzle-blasts met and merged blindingly between them. Lead seared Slim's left arm as his own slug smashed Laval's abdomen, doubling him convulsively, beating him back three erratic steps. With a superb effort Laval tried to straighten and heave his gun up, but the bullet only kicked gravel across Slim's boots. Leveling smoothly, Renner triggered once more. Laval landed flat on his back, writhing and squirming briefly, going rigid, then loosely asprawl and motionless on the earth.

Snarling, almost frothing at the mouth, Teel Bradder lunged for his weapon, but big Cabaniss had his gun clear and blazing bright before Bradder's was half-drawn. Jolted back against a boulder and dying on his feet Bradder still fought to bring his gun in line, but the only shot he fired spouted dirt at his own feet. Lurching forward, Bradder fell on his face and lay still.

Game and fearless to the end Drake Bemis made a good quick draw, but he could not match the flawless speed and perfection of Ace Alsobrine. Lightning leaped at Bemis and Ace's bullet was in his heart before Bemis could pull the trigger. His great right arm jerked up and the gun exploded into the misty air. Drake Bemis turned in a heavy wavering slow-motion twirl, his feet tangled, and his broad burly body dropped with a sodden thump in the sand.

There it was, played out to the brutal bitter end. Four more dead men around the campfire on the bank of the Arkansas, five with Horse Hornaday yet unburied. Six able-bodied men and the crippled Pollard left to get the herd across the river and over the plains to Abilene. Still, things were looking better.

"We'll make it all right now," said Needle Vereen. "The evil and rot has been stomped out. The snakes are goin' back into the ground."

Short-handed as they were, it took them all day to bury the dead and make the comparatively easy crossing into Kansas. But the way ahead looked broad and open, peaceful and serene. The snakes were gone.

IN THE Trail's End Saloon in Abilene, Slim Renner was trying to drown in whiskey the self-accusing thoughts that had tormented him all the way in from the Arkansas. The notion that his own hesitancy, indetermination and negligence had been responsible for the death of so many good Texans. At the same corner table, drinking with less morbid concentration and more relaxed pleasure, were Ace Alsobrine, young Kelleway and old Needle Vereen.

Occupied elsewhere, in no doubt a similar fashion, were Hal Madigan and Doak Cabaniss, while Price Pollard was still under the doctor's care. It seemed, as it always did lately, that dozens of people were missing . . . They had beaten the deadline, in spite of everything, and Madigan had doubled their pay and established an account to cover everything they ate and drank in Abilene.

"Two hundred dollars," murmured young Kelleway. "Most money I ever had at one time in my life."

Ace Alsobrine smiled. "You're young, son. You'll see the time when you spend more'n that in one night, won't he, Needle?"

"I reckon," Vereen said. "If he's as foolish as you and me, Ace."

"Dead men's money," muttered Slim Renner, draining his glass and pouring it full again.

"Cut it out, kid," Vereen said. "Quit blamin' yourself. We're all to blame, Slim, every man jack of us. And us old hands a hell of lot more'n you."

"That's right, Slim," said Alsobrine. "*We* should've known. We should've stopped it dead back at the Red River."

But Slim Renner refused to be comforted. He had known about Pete Laval's murderous plot, almost from the beginning. He had let things slide while man after fine man died: Winfield, Tarver, Ullmer, Jessop, Libbey, Hornaday . . . And some not so fine, too.

A girl crossed the smoke-veiled room to their corner and stood by the table. She was fairly tall, strongly built, her bare arms firm and golden in the lamplight, her low-cut dress revealing a full bosom. Her hair was bleached yellow, her face chiseled and hard, and the eyes had a cold greedy look that reminded the men of Drake Bemis' eyes. The paint on her mouth failed to disguise the thin tight cruelty of her lips. She looked selfish, grasping, calculating and mean. Her smile was as false as her dyed hair.

"Are you boys from Texas?" she inquired. "I met some boys from the Bar-M last summer." She waited for an invitation to sit down but it did not come.

"That's our outfit," Ace Alsobrine said.

She thought he was very elegant, handsome, and the other two young men weren't bad either. The fourth was an old-timer, wrinkled and homely. They were all dressed in clean outfits, bathed,

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shaved, their hair trimmed neatly, their faces deeply bronzed.

"It is?" she exclaimed. "Why, that's wonderful! Did you have a good drive up? And where is Pete Laval?"

"We had a wonderful drive," Alsobrine said. "And Pete Laval is dead—deader than hell!"

"Along with thirteen others," Slim Renner said without looking up at her. "Go away, will you?"

"You a friend of Pete's?" asked Needle Vereen, squinting at her. "Yes, I recollect you and Pete traipsin' together some last year."

"Dead?" the girl gasped. "Pete Laval —*dead!* I can't believe it. I just can't believe that!"

"You don't have to," Slim said. "Just drift along, lady."

She looked down at his sun-streaked brown head, his clear strong profile, brooding gray eyes and firm mouth. "What's the matter with this one here?" she asked, piqued by his attitude, forgetting Pete Laval and last summer's brief romance. "So sad and mournful—and sweet. He needs Lola Lee to cheer him up."

The name struck a faint chord in Renner's memory. He thought of something Laval had told him, and he looked up at the girl for the first time. "Lola Lee," he said. "You don't want anythin' of a dollar a day man, do you?"

Something in his gray eyes and bleak young face chilled her for an instant. Then Lola smiled her most enchanting smile and pushed close to Renner, one firm bare arm slipping around his neck. "A boy like you," she crooned. "What couldn't I do-oo? . . . Listen, honey—"

With abrupt violence Slim Renner flung her away from him. Lola Lee staggered and might have fallen if the wall hadn't caught her naked back. Startled and shaken the girl hung there staring wide-eyed at Renner. Then rage contorted her features and she started for the table as if to strike at him. His voice lashed out and halted her.

"Get out of here," Slim Renner said. "You killed Pete Laval. You killed all the rest of them, too."

"You're crazy!" sobbed Lola Lee, turning and running toward the bar, yelling for the bouncers.

Two big huskies started for that corner. Slim Renner stood up suddenly and swung around to face them. Chairs scraped back as Ace Alsobrine, Kelleway and old Needle Vereen rose to stand with him, faces calm, eyes steady, hands free and ready. The strong-arm men looked at the long lean Renner, Alsobrine with his two guns slung low, stout young Kelleway, and wizened Needle Vereen. They stopped and retraced their way to the bar. "Them Texas men are all right, Lola," mumbled one of them. "They ain't causin' no trouble."

The four Texans resumed their seats quietly, as if nothing had happened. Kelleway passed out cigars and Renner poured another round of drinks from the bottle. The others were surprised to see that Slim's face was relaxed, easy, natural and pleasant again, smiling a slow grave smile.

"You look like you got a big load off your chest, Slim," remarked Needle Vereen.

"I did," Slim Renner said. "I found the one who was really to blame for all that killin'. I sure can rest some easier now."

"What's the trouble between you and that woman, Slim?" inquired Ace Alsobrine. "She pull somethin' on you sometime?"

"She pulled somethin' on all of us," Slim Renner said. "She put the whole damn idea into Pete Laval's head. He told me so himself." Slim went on to tell them about it.

"Always a female behind it," sighed old Needle Vereen. "Never saw it to fail, boys. Women and money are what trouble stems from every single solitary time." He took a deep swig of his whiskey.

"Thank God I'm past the age where either one of 'em matters to me. You young buckaroos have my heartfelt sympathy. I salute you!"

He drank again. Then his seamed leathery face and sharp birdlike eyes softened strangely. "But there was a little gal once down in Uvalde. . . ." said Needle Vereen.

THE END

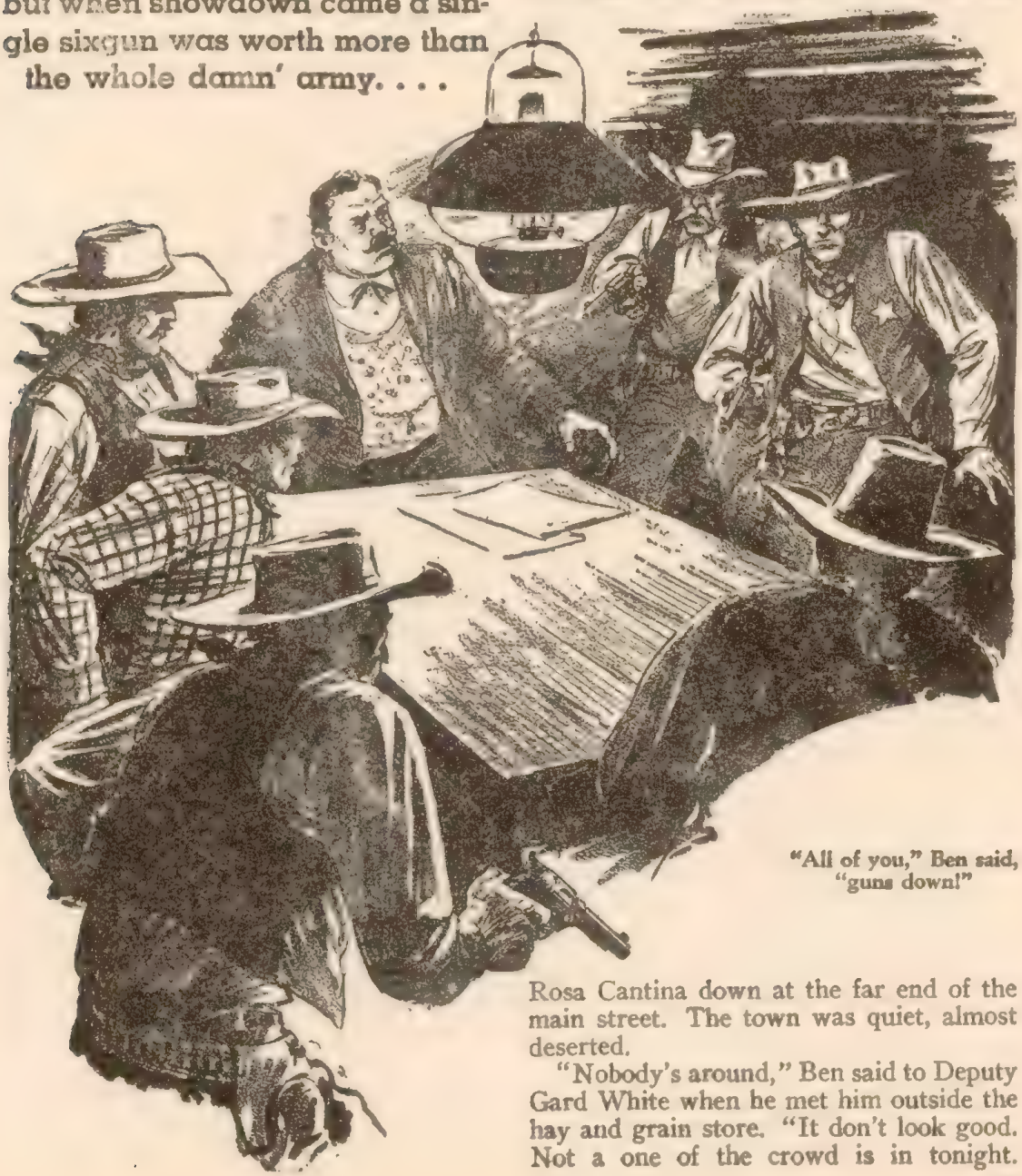
ONE LAND—ONE LAW

By

L. L. FOREMAN

The Governor's trouble-shooter pawed and bellered that he'd bring in troops to settle the cow trouble in San Manuel Valley, but when showdown came a single sixgun was worth more than the whole damn' army. . . .

FOUR times after dark Sheriff Ben Colter made the rounds of Cerro Gordo and didn't like what he found. He looked in at the Bank Bar, had a small beer in Joe Davo's place and made a thorough but unobstrusive check of La Rosa Cantina down at the far end of the main street. The town was quiet, almost deserted.



"All of you," Ben said, "guns down!"

"Nobody's around," Ben said to Deputy Gard White when he met him outside the hay and grain store. "It don't look good. Not a one of the crowd is in tonight.

Something's wrong about the thing!"

From habit, White backed into the alley alongside the store to light his pipe. "I noticed," he murmured.

His dry tone hinted that the conclusion was obvious. He was nearly old enough to be Colter's father. Occasionally, especially of late, he took a faintly superior attitude toward Ben. He had run against Ben for sheriff. After the votes were counted he had consented to play second fiddle as deputy, at Ben's request. Somewhat reluctantly, though. Like some others, Gard figured Ben too young to handle San Manuel Valley trouble. It was whispered that Ben had been elected by those San Manuel cattlemen and their friends who didn't want a strong and experienced hand at the law's helm.

"Want me to look into it?" Gard queried, cupping the glowing bowl of his pipe. He didn't have to explain what he meant. San Manuel cattlemen had been fighting over range and water rights for years. Sometimes the fight lay smoldering, a banked feud without fire or sparks. Sometimes it flared. The absence in town tonight of the cowmen and their fast-shooting crews could only mean trouble somewhere. It was only a few weeks since the last outbreak of fence-war and gunsmoke swapping.

"How'll you go about looking into it?" Ben asked.

Gard replied simply, "Ed Knapp's girl hangs out in the Cantina. I did her a favor one time."

Ben nodded. As Gard moved off he called quietly after him, "Anything you find out, tell me, Gard, eh? Not Major Heggen."

Gard looked back at him. "You're my boss, not the major."

"Okay," Ben said, and wished he hadn't mentioned it. Gard was pretty touchy. They had both been under an extra strain since the arrival of the major.

Major Hiram T. Heggen enjoyed political connections and had made a name for himself as an efficient trouble-shooter on the staff of the territorial governor. It was through the governor that he obtained his rank. It was the governor who sent him to settle the San Manuel trouble, after the last outbreak. So the major was sure of himself and his authority. The major was also sure of his ability to get the job done.

It was his opinion that this affair could be settled in short order, once and for all, by pinning the San Manuel cattlemen down to a hard and fast agreement. Those were his favorite, forceful phrases: short order, once and for all, and hard and fast. He was a man who firmly believed in getting things done, he explained to Ben. No nonsense about his methods. None of this shilly-shallying and beating around the bush. That was why the governor had chosen him.

"The general, too," he told Ben, meaning the departmental military commander. "The general knows I never back down. I never compromise. In the Gerwig-Copeland affair I took hold in short order and pinned them down to a hard and fast agreement. The governor backed me to the limit, as he does in this. But perhaps," he added condescendingly, "down here you didn't hear of that affair."

"We did," Ben said. "It was sort o' political, so maybe we missed appreciatin' some o' the finer points. This here is a bit different. It isn't political. It has to do with grass and water. These cow folks—Woodard and Galton and all the rest—they're tough. I keep that in mind all the time."

"I don't wish to criticize or condemn your methods and ability, Sheriff," Heggen generously allowed. "No doubt you have accomplished some progress here and there. But I'm bound to say that in your place I would have used different methods. Far different! As, I don't mind telling you, I intend to!" He banged a large fist down on Ben's desk. "Pin them down to a hard and fast agreement! Pin them down! You have the law on your side!"

"Yeah," Ben said. He wondered privately how long he'd last if he started shoving his badge in the faces of Woodard, Galton and the rest. Each would immediately jump to the conclusion that he was taking sides, and there'd be a rush for his sandy scalp.

AFTER watching Gard walk off stiffly, Ben went over to his little office in the jail building. There he found the major pacing up and down, tugging fiercely at his mustache.

"Look here, Colter!" the major said crisply. He had dropped the formal

courtesy of addressing Ben as sheriff. "I've got everything all weighed out in my mind. We're not getting anywhere. I've been here three days, and nothing accomplished. Nothing agreed on. Nothing whatever to show the governor. It won't do, I tell you!"

Ben turned the lamp down. Maybe, around the governor's mansion, they could safely have all the lights on and leave the windows open. He built and lighted a cigarette, cupping the match, while the major looked on impatiently.

"These folks," Ben remarked, "don't want any hard an' fast agreement. Against their principles."

He meant that they were of the sharp-edged kind who wouldn't accept anything, good or bad, that was pushed onto them. They figured that their quarrels were their own private affairs, and to hell with the governor and the devil look sideways on all politicians. It was hard to get that across to the major, though.

"If you forced it on 'em," Ben said, "right away they'd begin digging up ways to get around it. That's the kind o' folks they are."

Major Heggen shook his head vigorously. He was a red-faced man, tall, stout, of a consciously commanding manner. "They've got to obey the law of the land! Got to toe the line. The governor said so, definitely. 'Hiram,' he told me, we're pretty close, you know. He calls me by my first name. So does the general. In privacy, of course. 'Hiram,' the governor told me, 'do the job. Clean it up. Dammit, the Eastern papers have got hold of it. Line them up and make them come to an agreement, if you have to knock their heads together!' That's what the governor said to me."

Ben tried to conjure up a picture of the belligerent San Manuel ranchers being lined up and getting their heads knocked together by Major Heggen. By anybody. It occurred to him that the major was about as dangerous as a lighted firecracker in a powder shed.

"I think, Major," Ben began carefully, "in your place I'd be inclined to take the governor's orders—uh—not quite so definite! The law o' the land is a fine thing. But down here you got to shape the law to the—"

"The governor is in full possession of all the facts," the major interrupted, "and he passed them on to me. I believe that I have as much knowledge and understanding of the affair as you have, Colter! By the way, where's that deputy of yours?"

"He's checking around," Ben answered, and changed the subject. He didn't want the major to go barking on the trail. "Does the governor know the shooting has stopped?"

The shooting had been lively when he first pinned on his badge. There had been open war between the two main San Manuel factions—Jim Woodard and Bode Small, versus Sun Galton and Orme Sonthoumer, plus minor cowmen on both sides. He had paid visits to all of them, managed to convince them of his strictly impartial standing, and persuaded them to call off the fighting while something was worked out that might suit everybody.

Not that he really hoped for a permanent solution. The San Manuel feud had been going on for years. It had become something of a habit. To get them to quit shooting, though, was a victory that sev-

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eral lawmen before him had failed to achieve. It meant peace, which might last for months, even a year, till some bad booger broke it again. It had also meant sweat and nerve, for Ben, and a cautious treading on explosive eggs.

Major Heggen dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "Of course the shooting's stopped. They all know I'm here and that the governor is absolutely behind me! I intend to settle this affair, once and for all. Otherwise it'll go on for years."

Ben nodded. "Years. I expect it, in my case."

The major snorted. "I don't agree!" He stalked out.

BEN finished his cigarette and rolled another. You had to make allowances, he mused, for men like the major. They were smart, but they didn't have the right kind of savvy. Always in a big hurry to get the job done. And they thought the job was done as soon as some fool thing was written on paper and signed. Or when everybody gave the nod. They had to have something tangible, something to show, to report, to put on the record.

Gard White came in after a while, his face thoughtful and a trifle sardonic. He seated himself on the other side of the desk, spread his legs, and said casually, "There's been a big meetin' called. At Fuller's place. They're all there. The major called it. We ain't invited, I guess."

Ben brought his feet down off the desk. "Hell!"

"Hell," Gard agreed meditatively, "is right! Seems the major sent word to 'em all early today. Ordered 'em to show up. So they're all at Fuller's place. Yeah—all! It oughta be a lively meetin', eh? Got any orders, Sheriff?"

"Get your horse! I'll get mine. We're going out to Fuller's!"

"M-mm. I figured we might be. Horses are ready. Y'know, maybe you'll make a sheriff yet!"

Fuller's ranch lay west of the Truchas, therefore out of the disputed land of the San Manuel Valley. Fuller raised horses, no cattle, and was able to take a neutral viewpoint of the troubles of his cowmen neighbors.

His place didn't appear exactly neutral this night, though. Along the rutted track, after they passed the main gate, Ben and Gard rode by armed men who showed up a moment, scanned them, and retreated into the darkness.

The Fuller ranchhouse was lighted up. Fuller, himself, met the two riders, his manner nervous. "Things ain't going so good," he confided. "I just pray nothin' busts! They're all arguin'. How come you fellers didn't come with the major? He got here some time back."

Ben dismounted and led his horse. "We're not invited. This is the major's own private party. Has he knocked any heads together so far?"

Fuller looked blank. "He better not try! One bad move an' everything's goin to fly apart! Come on in. You'll see what I mean."

Ben could see, before even entering the house. He spotted a mob of murky figures lounging well out of range of the lighted windows and open door. Low tones, coming up from the direction of the feed shed, told him that the scrapping cowhands of the other faction were settled down there. He noted the absence of lighted cigarettes in the darkness, and could measure from that alone the hostile distrust between the two groups. A flare-up could break out at any instant.

He heard Gard grunt softly, and knew that his deputy too was sensing the nearness of violence here. Gard said, "This'll take handlin'!"

"It's the major's party," Ben reminded him. "We weren't invited to it."

Gard turned and sent him a cool, appraising stare. "Just the same, I guess I'll circulate round an' see what I can pick up. Got any objections—Sheriff?" A hint of scorn edged his voice.

"Suit yourself," Ben told him, and followed Fuller into the lighted ranchhouse.

The front room was crowded, hazed with tobacco smoke, noisy with rumbling voices and restless feet. At the table, glaring over it, Woodard and Small sat on one side, Galton and Sonthoumer on the other. Behind them, ranged closely together like armed allies and henchmen in two hostile packs, stood all the other cattlemen involved in the ancient dispute, as well as their ranch foremen and a sprinkling of men like Ed Knapp who was never seen without a gun.

The hard tension outside was as nothing to this. It was concentrated here. A careless movement, an unguarded word and the explosion would flash.

MAJOR HEGGEN sat at the head of the table, obviously unaware of danger, frowning severely at them all. His florid face turned redder at sight of Ben. For once he appeared slightly flustered and embarrassed. "Oh, er—hello, Colter! Glad you got here. H'm! Meant to ask you. Thought—er—thought you might be too busy to come. You're a busy man, y'know. Ha-ha! Yes. H'm!"

Ben said solemnly, "I just happened by an' saw the crowd. Don't mind me, major. I'm not buttin' in."

He could estimate his sag in prestige and respect from the way the others greeted him. A few short nods, a muttered word or two, and that was all he got. The major had taken command. The major was the Big Law now. Ben went and squatted on his heels in a corner, and was promptly forgotten.

Woodard, talking, ignored Ben altogether. He denounced bitterly the destruction of the west fence-line and the trespass of the Little Creek range.

Galton sprang up, angrily demanding to know by what right was Little Creek fenced off. Other men joined in from both sides, shouting across the table.

They were at it again, as they had for years. Ben leaned back in his corner, smoking, only half listening. He knew all the turns and twists of the dispute, inside out and backward. Some ranchers had sufficient grazing for their needs, and others had too many cattle. Some had plenty of water, others had too little. Fences were illegal on the open range, but up they went anyway, and were destroyed, rebuilt, and fought over. The law of the land had to thread itself through all those tortuous channels, guided by a fairly green young sheriff and a discontented deputy. It was pretty good law, though. And a good land.

Gard came in, located Ben through the smoke, and stepped around the high-tempered crowd to him. "Damn bad outside!" he muttered in Ben's ear. "All this shoutin' an' bellerin' in here, it's got their crews jumpy. They're set to cut loose at each other! What do we do? What now?"

Ben stubbed his cigarette out on the floor. "It's the major's party," he said, and Gard laid that cool look of scorn on him again. Ben glanced away.

Major Heggen slapped his hands on the table for attention, rose, and stared sternly around. "You men," he stated, biting off each word, "have got to reach an agreement! It is perfectly plain to me that you're unable to reach it by yourselves. That's my reason for calling this meeting. Now listen to me! Here is my solution. It's very simple."

They eyed him, their brows upraised. He had never owned a cow, to anybody's knowledge. They had been in the cattle business all their lives. They had fought thieves, drought, and one another, without any permanently satisfactory conclusion or the expectation of ever reaching one. He had been here three days. He was going to straighten it all out for them. They waited.

"Each of you," commanded the major, "will report to me at once the number of cattle you own. On that basis—a fair and equal percentage basis—I shall apportion the land among you! Very simple. I'm astonished that nobody has thought of it!"

They, too, were astonished. They blinked at him incredulously. To him his solution evidently was a shining example of clear logic, a masterly cutting of the tangled knot. To them it was deliriously loco, for a score of reasons. They got their breaths back and began shouting out a few of the reasons.

Some of the San Manuel range was poor in grass, waterless, fifty-acres-per-cow stuff. Other parts could support twenty times as many head. "It's grass an' water that counts, not land!"

Some ranchers were holding back their beef steers, gambling on a rise in the market price. Some were adding to their herds. "Some," roared Small, "ain't that ambitious!"

The size of most herds fluctuated from year to year, Galton began pointing out, and gave up in disgust. Woodard wanted to know who could be trusted to hand in a correct count of his cattle, and squinted meaningly at those on the other side of the table.

In the face of the uproar, the major

flinched as if he had somehow got headed into a blizzard. But he stubbornly stuck to his bright solution. "Those are the terms, and you'll abide by them!" he barked. "Else I'll call on the governor to send troops here to enforce my orders!"

The ranchers stared at one another, dismayed. Woodard and a few others turned and looked at Ben, almost appealingly. Ben gazed up at the ceiling.

Major Heggen sat down triumphantly. But he couldn't resist driving the nail in deeper. "I'll give you twelve hours to hand me your—er—cattle figures. I expect your cooperation! If it's not forthcoming I shall, as I said, call on the governor to—"

THE abrupt crack of a shot outside interrupted him. The men in the room fell silent, listening. Ed Knapp and his side-kick, little Barne Parkman, exchanged glances and edged toward the open door, hands low, darting eyes chillingly alert. Van Wittenberg, a Woodard man of tough reputation, watched them intently and let his right hand creep to his hip.

"To send troops down here to enforce—" the major started up again.

A ragged stammer of gunfire burst out. Woodard, his face expressionless like his top man, Van Wittenberg, watched Knapp and Parkman. So did Bode Small and the men on that side of the room.

Gard White urgently nudged Ben, who sat motionless and did nothing, said nothing. Gard then curled his upper lip in frank contempt, and moved slowly from him.

The major swallowed. "To enforce my orders!" he ended in a gasp. "What are they shooting for out there?"

"Practice," answered Sonthoumer, a man with a dry sense of humor. "Woodard—Small—you others—tell your boys to cut it out before somebody gets hurt!"

"You tell yours!" Woodard retorted. "They prob'ly started it, as usual!"

A rifle spat five times. Each bullet could be heard screaming past the open door where Knapp and Parkman stood together. The two men narrowed their eyes and moved back inward a step. A shotgun blared somewhere close by and blew a window in behind the major.

The crash of the window, and the major's involuntary yell, provided the momentary distraction that the two men at the door were waiting for. Knapp bent his elbow, and little Barne Parkman matched the action like a shadow. Van Wittenberg stroked his empty holster.

"Hold it, Ed!" Ben said. "You too, Barne—an' you, Van! All o' you—guns down!"

Knapp and Parkman switched their stares to him, and even Van Wittenberg, facing them, half turned. "Too much law round here!" said Knapp softly. The wild fever of violence, at last unleashed, was stamped on his dark, narrow face. "Get him, Barne!"

The short and savage discharge of guns, hammering back and forth across the crowded room, ended suddenly. "Guns down, I said!" Ben called. "I mean everybody!"

Ed Knapp let the gun fall from his broken hand, swearing quietly through teeth that were clenched so tightly he seemed to be smiling. Little Barne Parkman sucked in his breah and leaned against the wall, left hand holding his right shoulder. He was a strange little duck. When blood ran between his fingers he fainted dead away.

Van Wittenberg, with a bullet through his arm, scowled painedly at Ben.

"Sorry, Van," Ben said. "Had to do it. You pulled your gun."

"I wasn't pullin' it on you!"

"I know. But it wasn't peaceable, an' I'm playing no favorites." Ben nodded to Woodard, Galton, and the others. "Holler the word to the boys out there to lay off an' go home, eh? We don't want the major getting a wrong impression, now he's settled your troubles, do we? Major, you've done a real good job!"

The somewhat bewildered major was glad to hear it. He looked sick and in need of something to steady his nerves. Fuller caught Ben's eye and produced a bottle.

AFTER HE had administered a few times to his nerves, and was assured that the shooting had stopped and all was peace and goodwill around him, he was able to pull himself together. He was able to announce stoutly that he had known all along that this affair could be settled in short order, once and for all,

by getting everybody together for a hard and fast agreement. All it had needed was a strong guiding hand.

The major, absently taking another drink, failed to notice that the San Manuel cowmen were watching Ben.

"It was a big job," Ben said, after waiting politely for the major to run down. "Now that you've showed the way, sir, it seems to me that a signed an' sealed agreement isn't a bit necessary. You remember, sir, what I said about that kind of agreement. The job's done, sir, and everybody's mighty grateful to you, sir. Yes, sir!"

He looked around. "Yes, sir!" he repeated loudly.

"Don't know what we'd done without you, sir!" stated Woodard, baring his head. "Kindly give our respects to the governor, sir, when you report to him that all's peace in the San Manuel Valley, thanks to you, sir!"

For once there was the miracle of perfect agreement among them. They were united in the common cause—to get rid of the major and his loco ideas and threat of troops.

"Peace!" pronounced Bode Small reverently. "At last!"

"Peace!" clarioned Sonthoumer and several others.

They shook hands all around, trying to crush one another's fingers and swapping silent snarls. The major beamed and took another drink.

"A hard job, well done!" Ben said, while Gard grinned and winked at him behind the major's back. "Much as we'd admire to have you stay among us, we can understand how you have to return to more important duties. We'll all be on hand to say good-by, when you leave tomorrow, sir."

The major cleared his throat. He blew his nose. "Thank you, my friends, thank you!" he replied huskily. "And to you, Colter, I offer my thanks for your well-meant efforts toward making possible my —er—humble achievement here in this delightful valley! This land which, praise be, shall henceforth prosper and flourish under the gentle hand of eternal peace!"

Ben bowed, knowing, as well as he knew anything, that within a month or two the San Manuel cattlemen would be at it again.

"The law o' the land," he remarked to Gard later, as they rode to town behind the major's hired buckboard, "is okay. All you have to do, I figure, is shape it to the kind o' land it's in. Things are goin' to be easier for us, from now on, know that, Gard? Whenever the boys get too tough, all we do is wonder out loud if we should send for the major! See?"

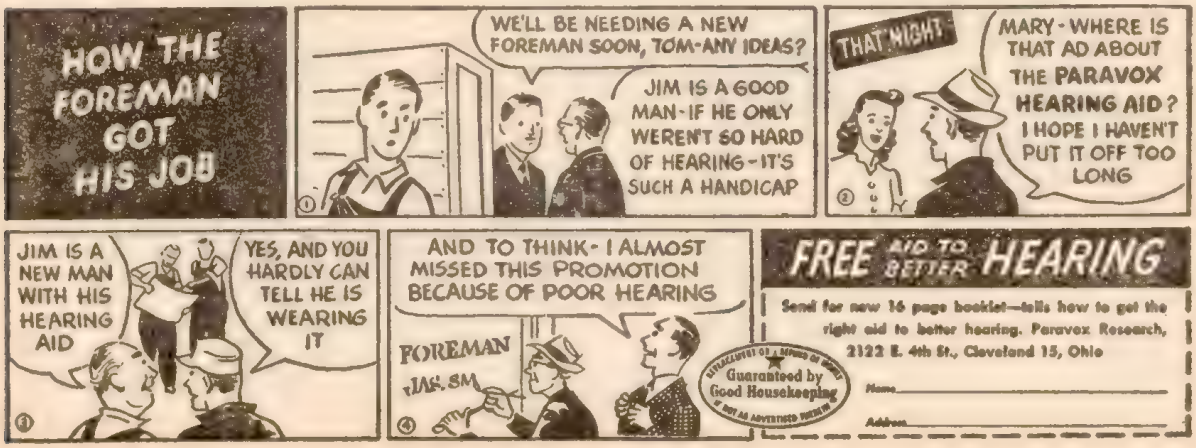
Woodard and Galton came riding on ahead of the bunch in the rear. "Ben, we appreciate what you did tonight," Woodard said.

"Uh-huh," Ben murmured. In a month or two they'd likely be roasting him.

"We've talked it over," Galton put in. "We've all voted to give you a new pair o' guns, silver mounted."

"Thank you kindly," Ben returned. "Gard, I'll give you one of 'em. I only need one."

Gard nodded. "I took notice, Ben—I took notice!"


HOW THE FOREMAN GOT HIS JOB
WE'LL BE NEEDING A NEW FOREMAN SOON, TOM-ANY IDEAS?
JIM IS A GOOD MAN-IF HE ONLY WEREN'T SO HARD OF HEARING-IT'S SUCH A HANDICAP
THAT NIGHT
MARY-WHERE IS THAT AD ABOUT THE PARAVOX HEARING AID? I HOPE I HAVEN'T PUT IT OFF TOO LONG
JIM IS A NEW MAN WITH HIS HEARING AID
YES, AND YOU HARDLY CAN TELL HE IS WEARING IT
AND TO THINK- I ALMOST MISSED THIS PROMOTION BECAUSE OF POOR HEARING
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THE MAN FROM

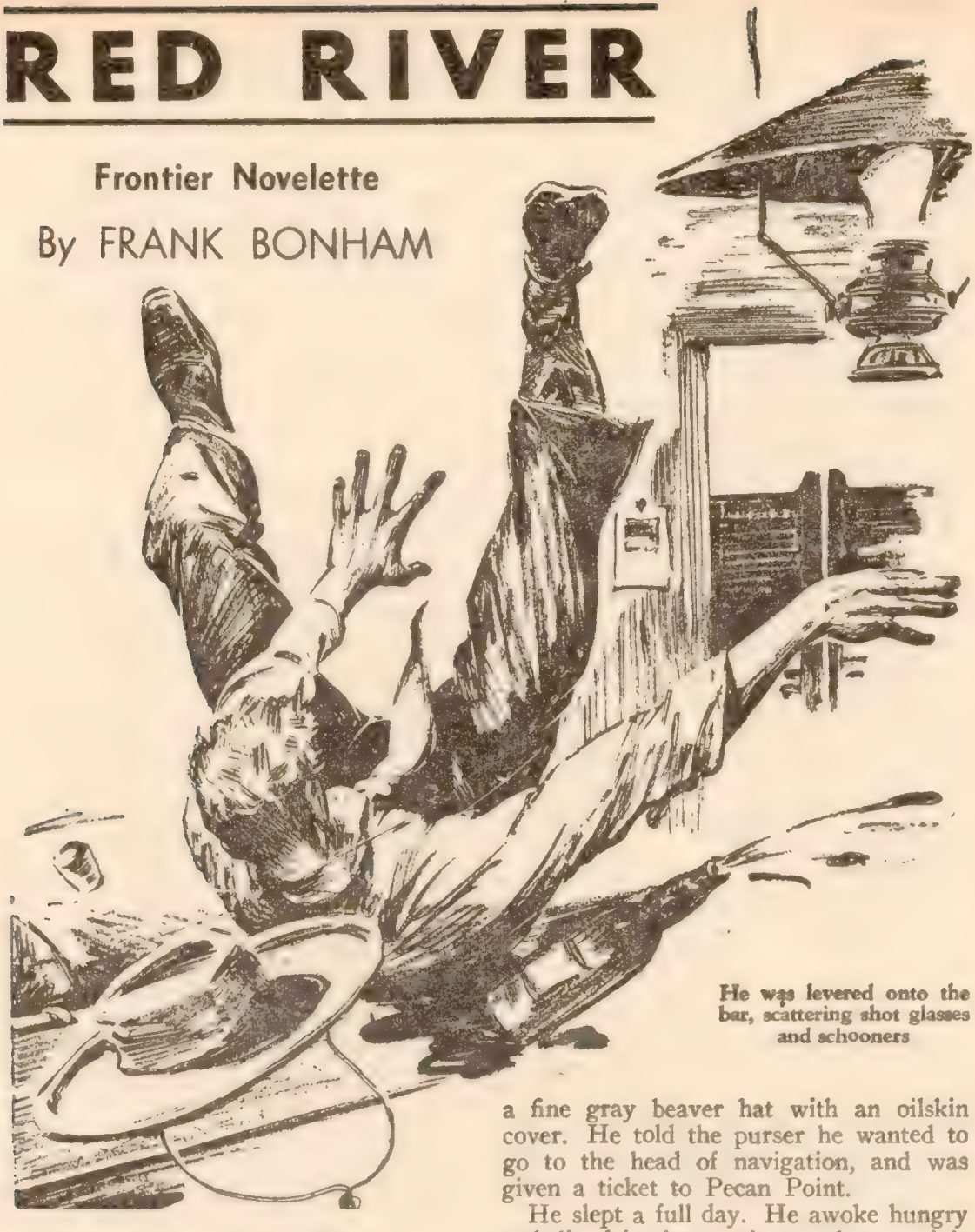
When the men with brine-hardened fists spurred up, Old Hendershott proved that a man's winter years don't always snow under his fighting fire!

Donley's fist exploded

RED RIVER

Frontier Novelette

By FRANK BONHAM



He was levered onto the bar, scattering shot glasses and schooners

CHAPTER ONE

Serve Your Summons With Fists

HENDERSHOTT was drunk when he boarded the Red River packet at Shreveport. He had been drunk for some time. He was a big man who resembled a decaying mansion, full of traces of grandeur but now possessed of nothing particularly remarkable beyond a fine gray beaver hat with an oilskin cover. He told the purser he wanted to go to the head of navigation, and was given a ticket to Pecan Point.

He slept a full day. He awoke hungry and dined in the evening at the captain's table. He had a way about him which always got him a place at the roulette table or an inside seat on a stagecoach.

The captain told him they would tie up at Pecan Point the next morning. "What kind of place is it?" asked Hendershott. He was a dark-eyed, solidly-built man with a trim iron-gray mustache.

The master looked him over. "Mean to say you're settling there without know-

ing. That sounds like a strange deal!"

"I may not settle. I'm looking for an investment of some kind. Cotton's no damn' good any more. I distrust the railroads as an investment. I may go into cattle." He said this with unconcern and soaked the tip of his cigar in the finger-glass of brandy beside his plate. He had been no closer to cotton, as an investment, than the cotton drawers he wore; he hadn't enough money to buy more than a few shares of railroad stock.

"Well, there's a lot of big ranches around," the master said. "But watch out for your title. This is where they had the Justifier-Moderator feud a couple years back. County's splattered up with grants, headrights and deeds, like a patchwork quilt."

Hendershott had a feeling that he was making another blunder, that his genius for getting into wrong games had not left him. He was fifty-six, a frontier plunger who had suddenly begun to realize his age and knew he must get into something solid soon or live out his old age as a cadger of drinks.

He had left St. Louis with thirty-five hundred dollars, the result of a faro game. He arrived at Shreveport with twenty-six hundred, the residue from another game. This would still buy him a small ranch, or part of one, and cattle were on the uptrend.

* * *

The town of Pecan Point lay in a cloud of feathery pecans on a high spit of land above the river. There were prosperous looking stockyards back of the wharves. A dusty road wound through the trees up into the town. In the warm early-morning—spiced with fragrances of woodsmoke, odors of the river, the ammoniac smell of the cattle pens—a Mexican walked at the head of an ox-cart bringing a dripping load of vegetables down to sell to the packet. A tall horseman wearing brown bullhide chaps and a low-crowned Stetson jogged past the pens and stopped at the wharfmaster's shack.

Hendershott went ashore with his shoulders back. The horseman watched him go by with his rattan suitcase balanced on his shoulder. He nodded.

Hendershott had been given the name of the McCallum Land Company by the captain. The office wasn't open. Along the quiet street with its few red-brick store fronts and many wooden faces, all roofed with rusty sheetiron, activity was beginning to stir. He quickly found a restaurant.

When he returned to the land office a girl was inserting a key in a padlock. She was blonde and slender, wore a dark skirt which flowed down from slim hips and a high-necked white blouse with a gold watch pinned to the left breast. She raised a hand against the sun as she faced him, smiling.

"Good morning!"

Hendershott introduced himself. "I'm down from Wyoming, miss. A rancher. I was given the name of your firm as knowing ranch values in Shevlin County."

They went into a long, narrow office cut by a counter. A woven fiber rug was on the floor. Maps papered the walls and on a desk was a framed picture of the girl. A gas light fixture hung from the ceiling. She went behind the counter and put on paper cuffs.

"Now, then," she said briskly. "Ranch property? Well, you'd have done better a year ago. Everything's up. . . ."

She went through some listings with him. Five thousand was the cheapest. Suddenly she hesitated. "Now, I wonder . . .! Would you be interested in a partnership?"

"Might."

"Well, there's a boy . . . a young man, I mean, named Gaines, who owns a very nice ranch. In fact, the townsite lies in it. It's not big but he's got riverfront and the railroad is supposed to come through here some day. I think he's in town today to see about shipping some cattle. If you'd be interested—"

"How do you know he'd be interested?"

She hesitated. "He's been talking about starting a blood herd, and of course that would mean money. I'll send a boy to find him."

IT WAS hot in the wharfmaster's shack. Bindloss, the wharfmaster, leafed through the papers on a clipboard. "They'll be a towboat up with bricks next week, Johnny," he said. "You can send

seventy-five head back with it. Seems like this is the second beef-cut you've made, ain't it?"

Johnny Gaines was a long, brown-faced young rancher with a raw-edged look about him. "That's right," he said. "I cut out a lot of dried-up mother stuff for canners. There's no reason I should feed them, is there?"

Bindloss shrugged. "Next spring you'll be paying three prices to get back any heifers you sell."

"I may be selling a little heavy. It's that or borrow."

Bindloss turned the cigar thoughtfully in his fingers. "Has he served the papers on you yet?"

Gaines said quietly, "Who? What papers?"

"Oh, hell!" the wharfmaster stated. "Everybody knows about it. We know suit was filed and we've been waiting for Donley to nerve himself up to serving you."

"Well, he hasn't nerved himself up yet. You'll hear about it when he does."

He went out. A Mexican boy was coming down the hill toward him. Gaines thought, Damn these chuckleheaded land laws. And damn the hog-nosed scroungers like Coke Donley who tried to take advantage of them. There'd been a hell of a fuss last year when the county seat was moved up here from Dixon. Records were supposed to have been falsified on the way, a book of old land grants was lost and a man was killed, finally. That more or less shook the bushes loose of loudmouths unwilling to back up their claims, and it was smoothed over. But now a few like Donley were starting to bellow like gelded bullfrogs that they'd been swindled. It was all down in that book of lost grants.

Their two ranches lay side by side, like a couple of parlor rugs with their end-fringes lapping into the Red River. The difficulty was that they did not touch: that someone apparently had pulled them apart two miles at the river end, so that there was a tapering alley between, in the middle of which lay the town of Pecan Point.

But precedent, never tested in court, bestowed the no-man's land section on Gaines. And now Donley was shouting that if he could only find that lost grant-book he could prove the land really was a headright attached to his ranch.

He had only discovered this after the Texas Shortline made plans to come through, and ran stakes into the town. It killed this coffin-faced Missouri bull-whacker transplanted to a Texas cattle-ranch to see anybody else profit by railroad proximity and the chance of selling town lots if Pecan Point began to grow. Up to now it had been all talk and legal fuss, and Johnny Gaines guessed it would stay like that.

The Mexican kid on the hill had stopped him. *"Que húbole?"* he said. *"La señorita Hestér quiere que usted venga prontito!"*

"'Ueno," said Johnny Gaines. He flipped him a penny.

Going up the hill he thought about the difference between plans and materializations. The little bit of Cross Timbers land his father had hung onto so long he had developed and added to. It seemed to him that he had not stopped to rest in twelve years. He was twenty-six; had

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been doing a man's work since he was fourteen. But hard times and taxes had kept him ground down so that he never had a dollar to sweeten the kitty with when opportunity handed him a full house. These were good times for cattlemen, too, but dammit he was barely getting by. He could sell out now at a nice figure; but could he ever get back in? It seemed the part of logic to him to oversell his herd a shade and buy some Herefords.

Passing the bank, he saw Coke Donley's bay standing beside that of his foreman, Hank Fayette. He thought, Boys, just try it!

HESTER McCALLUM looked so good to him that he held her hand until she began to pull away. He saw color rise to her cheeks. Her eyes reproved him, those sage-green eyes that brought out the cocoa tones of her skin. He let her take her hand away and leaned on his elbows on the counter. "Casoose said I was wanted."

She nodded at Gus Hendershott. "This is Mr. Hendershott," she said. "Mr. Hendershott, this is John Gaines, the man I was telling you about."

Johnny gave the stranger a steady look. He saw some signs of careless living on him—ruts beside the nose and mouth, dark-brown stains under the eyes—but Hendershott's grip was warm and he had an easy way with him which seemed to hint of honesty.

Somewhat hesitantly, the girl explained to Gaines that Hendershott was looking for an investment and would consider a third-interest in Gaines' Double-O.

It took the wind out of Gaines for a moment. Partnership! Hester was studying him anxiously. "I know you hadn't really thought about it, but—well, it's a lot better than going to the bank at thirteen per cent. And you'd have an experienced man to help you."

Johnny asked some questions and Hendershott countered with some of his own. Something occurred to Johnny.

"Had any experience with Herefords?"

Hendershott's bland, dark face veiled itself behind cigar smoke. "I was herd manager for Ladd and Fairchild at one time. Wyoming. They're not so delicate. Little more salt. Little more fescue."

Now Gaines was impressed. He pumped Hendershott for information but the big man in his black frock coat grew taciturn. "This place of yours," he mused, "it's free and unencumbered?"

They decided to go down and get the banker's views on the subject.

As they left, Hester gave Johnny an isn't-it-wonderful sort of crinkled smile.

THERE was nothing a banker could do to dissuade them. In two hours, after a few drinks and a long talk, they were at a lawyer's. They went to the Bullshead Saloon to seal it, and it was here that Coke Donley found them.

Donley was a man with the build of a bear and a flat face. He was only about five feet eight but durably made, a Percheron of a man who had broken horses and whacked bullteams before he got into ranching. He had hit it just right, and a rising market had kept him on top. And like so many men, he had mistaken national prosperity for personal astuteness, and he had contempt for men less lucky. He worked his punchers hard, regarded his lawyer as a god and cursed his cows because they didn't have twins. He saw himself as a cattle king, but a middling-sized ranch provided little room for the growth of such an idea, and now he was looking for ways to expand at least cost.

He was with Hank Fayette, his ramrod. They took a table, and Gaines, watching them in the mirror, knew instantly what was on their minds. He winked at Hendershott. "Want to meet some friends of mine." They joined Donley and Fayette at the table. Gaines introduced Hendershott as his partner.

"What's a matter?" Donley grunted. "That postage stamp ranch too much for you alone?"

"Gus," Gaines said, "is a Hereford expert. He worked for Ladd and Fairchild, in Wyoming. We're buying blood stock this winter."

"That's going to take capital, ain't it?" Fayette said.

"We've got that. And I may sell some town lots when the railroad comes through. Farms and the like. I heard last week the Shortline is really on the way."

Gus Hendershott was not a slow man and he was picking things up. He had

picked up the animosity between these two men. He was still puzzled by some other things. "I hadn't heard about the railroad," he said.

Gaines shrugged. "Didn't want to get you excited about something that might not happen."

Coke Donley roasted the end of a cigar in a match-flame. "Did you tell him about the land being under a cloud?"

"I didn't know it was," Gaines said. "Nobody's ever told me."

The frown left Donley's eyes. He had made the opening he wanted. He reached for a long envelope thrusting from his side coat pocket. But Johnny's hand was there first, and he was holding the envelope before him a moment and then tearing it across. He dropped the pieces back in the rancher's pocket.

"Don't ever do it, Coke," he said. "I don't care whether you're basing this bluff on a lost grant-book or a personal message from God! It ain't going to stick, and we aren't going to line a platoon of lawyers' pockets finding it out!"

He was half way to the door before Donley got his breath. He heard Donley's chair fall, and looked back to see the rancher and his ramrod moving down on him, while Hendershott came to his feet in frowning alarm. Johnny stood with his palms on his hips. Donley began shaking the cigar in Gaines' face.

"By God, I've given you all the rope you're going to get! You've accepted service. I've let you run cattle on that land of mine for the last time. They'll tell you that in court next week."

Why had he always wanted to tangle with Donley? Gaines wondered. He hated everything about him, the large pores of his nose, the way his fat neck grew out of his shoulders, the kind of saddle he rode. He said, "This ain't a court matter, Coke. You and I just don't happen to like each other. Why waste money telling everybody about it in court, when we can do it right here?"

Donley slowed down. His eyes were dark gray and cunning. He looked around and saw the listening saloon, the bartender pausing in the act of dipping beer glasses in a pail of water, the indolent cowboy patrons looking up from their pastimes. "Any way you like it," he said. "But don't think because you've took a whipping in the Bullshead it will get you out of one in court."

He made a motion as if to pull off his coat, tilting his head down, but abruptly his left hand went forward without warning. It jarred Gaines in the soft spot below the wishbone. He went back out of sheer surprise, and Coke Donley was on him.

THEIR collision had been a long time coming. It had the more force for that. Donley was a bullwhacker's god when it came to fighting. Johnny Gaines fought with the spit-and-sting of cowboy scrappers. Wisely, he kept dodging the cowman's charges. He would stick a sharp set of knuckles into his face when he saw an opening. In the first half-minute he got his breath back and began figuring how he was going to outthink this man, because he knew damned well he was not going to outslug him.

And then Donley's fist exploded in the middle of his chest with such force that he was levered onto the bar, scattering shot glasses and schooners, and slithered across it and fell onto the duckboard behind. He coughed. His chest felt as though a rib had come loose. He heard Donley's laughter and the barkeep's shouted warnings. He took hold of a shelf and hauled himself up.

Donley was waiting. Johnny swayed around the end of the bar but stopped when he saw the man lunging into him. He pulled back and Donley's swing was short. Seizing this advantage, Gaines stabbed at his face. His fist smacked flatly and cut a deep rip above his eye.

Gus Hendershott, by the table, watched all this with a disturbed feeling of having been projected into something the reverse of what he had wanted. He hadn't wanted a battle: he wanted an investment. But he perceived also that if what he had bought into was worth scrapping over, it might be worth keeping.

He yelled when Gaines ripped into Donley with long rights and lefts coming up from his hip-pockets. The boy was sallow with the pain of the punch he had taken but crowding his luck as far as he could. Donley was shambling back, shocked by the impact of a half-dozen blows to the

face. His long Chihuahua spurs locked and he went back heavily and rolled over on his face as if badly hurt.

Hendershott, a shrewd counter of odds, looked about. Half the watchers had gone sourly silent; the other half were yelling. It seemed to show that a split existed in this town as well as between the two men, and he recalled what the captain of the packet had told him about a feud. Then he saw something that jolted him.

One of Donley's spur-leathers had been pulled loose in his fall. As the man came up, his hand unobtrusively palmed the horseshoe of the spur-frame, with the shank and rowel protruding between his fingers. Hendershott took two steps forward and brought his bootsole down upon Donley's wrist. The thick fingers writhed. The spur fell. Donley's face turned upward.

Hendershott grinned: "Temper, temper!"

Donley pulled his hand away and got onto his feet without much sureness. At this moment Johnny Gaines stepped in and laid one across the point of his chin. Donley staggered aside, fell against a table and went down again. He didn't get up.

CHAPTER TWO

Bullet Answer to a Court Order

ON THE boardwalk Hendershott took Johnny by the arm and started him back to the McCallum office. He put a street corner between them and the saloon, then halted. Johnny tested a swelling on his left cheekbone. "Gus, I reckon I should have mentioned Coke. But there's not a legal bone in the document he was trying to serve."

"Never mind. Suppose you find your horse and rent me one and we'll get out of town till certain people cool off."

Johnny gave him a list of provisions. "You might pick these up at Coyner's. I'll meet you there with the horses in twenty minutes."

Johnny went back to the land office.

The first thing he had to explain was his face. Hester almost cried. "Johnny! Just when you were beginning to get started!" she said.

"Well, I'm still started, ain't I?"

"Not when you dodge trouble this way. You've got to face that suit sometime or other. It will only cost a couple of hundred to fight it and you'll set a precedent for Shevlin County that will end all these land-grabs once and for all."

"I thought I'd just done that."

"Do you think a whipping will stop a man like Coke Donley? He's going right ahead with that suit; and he's got witnesses that you were as good as served with the paper." Her hands held his shoulders. "Johnny, you owe it to the others as well as yourself! Dad knows the implications; he's told you before. It's true some of our titles aren't sound at all. But they're as sound as anything in Texas these days, and this is the kind of precedent that will determine whether they'll stand or not. But if we fight these suits with our fists, that will only be a precedent of another kind."

Johnny said, "I'm not much of a man for lawyers."

He was at the door when she said angrily, "Then you'll not be much of a man for getting anywhere with those plans of yours! They're going to hold court next week whether you're in town or not. And if you aren't there, you'll lose by default!"

* * *

Johnny Gaines ran cattle on sixty thousand acres of Cross Timbers range, a rolling country of shin-oak and reddish-brown loam. He had a sod cabin under the shoulder of a hill, corrals of thorny bo'-d'arc branches and an all-year spring branch that wound through his horse pasture. It was a grand layout, and Gus Hendershott seemed to expand in it those first few days. The promoter in him saw barns rising, a big whitewashed adobe ranchhouse taking shape.

Johnny placed an order for a Hereford bull and a few heifers, and he and Hendershott started preparing for their arrival like a rancher expecting a mail-order missus. They fenced off the bogs in what they were already calling the Hereford pastures. They set out salt and Hendershott picked the kind of grasses they should hay for winter feed. A crew of

Mexicans was set to work scything and trussing.

This pasture bordered the Red River at the north end of Johnny's land. It was not far west of town. It was in the alley of dubious land between the two ranches. On the day of the trial, he and Gus were setting fence posts. Johnny paused in work to chuckle: "Reckon by now we're trespassing, hey?"

"I wonder if it mightn't been smarter to hire a lawyer?"

Gaines didn't answer that.

* * *

Another week passed. Hendershott was saddle-sore and crippled up from the hard work, though he tried to pass it off. He hadn't worked so hard in twenty years; but as soreness tempered into toughness, he began to feel stout as a young bull. He talked ambitiously.

" 'Nother year, son, and we'll put up a red barn yonder like nobody ever seen in this country!"

"What do we want a barn for?"

A gulf of uncertainty opened before Gus. ". . . Why—to keep the cows in at calving time," he faltered.

"What are we buying—cows or wimen?" Johnny snorted. "These critters are going to do their calving where we don't have to feed them."

Hendershott backtracked. "Of course, the climate's milder down here. I was thinking in terms of Wyoming. . . ."

They went out to string fence a few days later and Gus got himself tangled in it so badly a roll of wire had to be cut in six places to free him. Johnny held his impatience. Yet in many ways he had begun to feel that he was carrying more weight than he had before acquiring a partner. Hendershott was always wanting to take along fancy doings in the way of grub when they went out to move cattle. He seemed accustomed to ranching on a chuck-wagon scale. A few cans of sardines and a sack of biscuits would last Johnny for three days.

IT CAME to a head one evening at the holding corral near the river. To catch the seventy-five head of canners he was going to ship, they had had to take nearly twice that many. The cattle were a breechy outfit and hung together like burrs in a sheep's pelt. Fancy cutting was necessary to chouse the unwanted steers out the gate. Often as not, Hendershott would fail to get the gate open in time and the critter would swerve back.

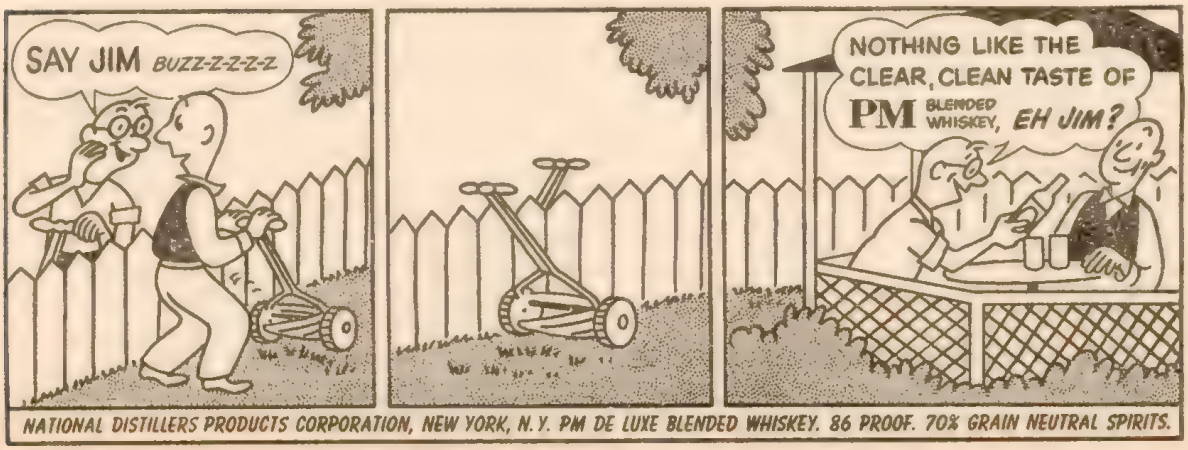
There was a young bull in the herd that would take just so much prodding. He had begun to upset the whole herd. Finally Johnny bulldozed him away from the rest and sent him head down at the gate. At this moment, Hendershott took off his hat and began to fan himself.

Startled, the bull pivoted, made a pass at Johnny's knee with his horn and went back to the crowd.

Johnny loped over to where Gus was sleeving sweat out of his eyes. "Where did you say you'd worked cattle?"

Gus grinned, "Shucks, pardner, anybody's apt—"

"Especially you!" Johnny Gaines rapped. "You outfit for a two-day roping like you were going to winter on Pike's Peak. You talk about barns; about giving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the Herefords extra salt, and then show you don't even know how much a range cow needs; and now you work the gate like the doorman at a Houston hotel."

He was red and hot, and Gus knew there was no longer any use bluffing. "Come on down to the river and let's have a smoke," he said.

They descended a steep, grassy pitch to the ready border of the stream. Gus scooped water with the brim of his hat, and drank. He lit a cigar.

"All I know about beef," he confessed, "is that it's good with ketchup."

Johnny stared.

"Johnny," Gus said, "this is only one of a lot of bluffs that didn't pan out for me. I've been a gambler since I was ace-high to a deck of cards. But the game's too fast for me now; I'm sick of riverboats and saloons. I wanted to get into something where I could work the poisons out and make an honest living." He saw the boy's lips thinning and the young eyes hardening. "This looked good. I could help you out, and help myself."

"How," Johnny asked, "were you going to help me?"

"Capital, to start with. And—dammit, boy, I'm not so soft as I look. I know I'll have to put out the work, and I aim to do it." He said without emphasis, "There was that Donley business, o' course, but we won't talk about that."

Johnny stood back, hands in his hip pockets. "Damn right we won't. That was a bluff I knew I could call. And did! But it's a tinhorn trick you've pulled. For two thousand bucks I carry your dead weight on my back the rest of my life!"

He spat disgustedly between them. "You'll pack your spare shirt out when we take these critters to town tomorrow. You can't help me and I can't help you. I'll take out a loan to give you back the two thousand."

Gus ventured a conciliatory grin. "You got a temper under that porcupine hair, kid."

And it's damnwell all I can do to hang onto it!"

"All right, Johnny. A partnership is when two fellers hit it off. That makes this more like a marriage."

When they reached the corral, the cattle were loping off through a great gap in the bo-'d'arc hedge, and two punchers were uprooting other posts with ropes stretching tautly from their saddle-horns.

THE punchers had come up the ravine below the corral. They had not seen the two ponies tethered at the edge of the blackjacks rimming the bluff: That was how Johnny Gaines reasoned it. He knew the men. One was Donley's ramrod, Fayette. The other was a cowboy with Delaware Injun blood, Tate Castro. They pulled out another section of hedge and Castro shouted an Injun yell as he dragged it away. Then he saw the men walking toward the corral.

Fayette leveled an arm. "Right there, feller! This is Flying H land . . . court order. Move them cattle back where they belong and keep them there."

Johnny kept walking. "Git down and start building fence."

Castro laughed. He was a small crooked-nosed man with the complexion of a bad cup of coffee. "Sure, we build fence. Two mile west!"

"You build fence right here, Injun. Git off that nag!"

Castro hauled up the fence post and shook it loose. He thoughtfully coiled his hard-twist and then, without warning, swinging the rope about his head, spurred upon Johnny. The pinto flung its head and rattled bridle. Johnny saw the sun slice a silver spark off one iron shoe. He pulled his Colt and kept his thumb on the hammer while he lined it out on the horse's head. The gun-kick lifted his forearm sharply; the smoke of black powder smutted the air. It cleared, and Tate Castro was reeling in the saddle while the horse veered away. Castro rode like a greenhorn, taking the pitches hard; he bounced out of the saddle and landed on one shoulder and the side of his head. There was a welter of blood in his mouth when Johnny reached him. A hole as big as a saddle-horn was in the back of his neck, a small one where his collar button would have been.

Fayette's chin had sagged into the loose red skin of his neck. His black eyes stared. They stared at Gus Hendershott, who held a Peacemaker on him.

Johnny rose over the confusion in his head. "Drop a rope on it," he told the ramrod, "and git. Forget about court orders. Tell the marshal I'll be in tomorrow."

Afterward, he sent Gus on back to the cabin and gathered up what he could of the steers and tied them to trees with *peales*. He caught thirty-five of them before dark. Riding back, he tried to sort through the clumsy thoughts in his head. There was nothing to tie to. Just some regrets . . . that he had not faced Donley in court . . . that by a matter of inches, he had killed a man instead of a horse. That some belated plans involving Hester McCallum must wait, perhaps indefinitely.

He thought, Old Hendershott will back me up— Then he recalled that he and Old Hendershott had busted up. Well, he wouldn't crawfish to seduce the man to his side. Hendershott could play his cards as he damned well chose.

Hendershott, when he arrived, had ridden away on his rented pony. A note lay on the kitchen sink. Not from Gus, however. From Hester, and brought over by someone.

Dear Johnny: Something big's happened. The grant-book's been found at the old county seat. Everyone is hurrying in to protect his rights, and you ought to be here. Especially because of something Pop found out. . . .

JOHNNY stubbornly took his time the next morning, bunched his cattle, and drove them along toward town. It was a lot harder to warm up over a strip of land when you had to square a killing with a town marshal. He picked up a couple of Mexicans he occasionally hired and they helped him pen the cattle at the stockyards. Then he rode up into town.

Marshal Van Coyner, who sold groceries in his spare time, had been watching for him. Everybody knew he had brought a herd in, and when Coyner accosted him before the Bullshead, half the town of Pecan Point awoke to follow them down to the marshal's office. It was a small mud-walled room warmed by an iron stove fuming with the smoke of mesquite roots. Coyner was a lumbering Swede who believed in an open town but wanted it to appreciate the favor by keeping quiet. He did not like killings, and said so.

"You say you ain't a trouble-maker. Then why wasn't you in town for to answer Donley's suit? *That's* where this business starts."

"Not for me. It started with a 'breed trying to run me down—don't cut any caper whose land it was. And I shot at the horse and hit the 'breed."

Coyner's blond-mustached face didn't change. "Now, how would I be believin' that? Didn't I have it from Hank Fayette that you was ordered off the land and throwed down on Castro? Did you have any witnesses?"

"Yes—there was—" Johnny halted.

Coyner's wide mouth smiled. "That's what I thought. Johnny, get the bow out of your neck. If it wasn't for Gus Hendershott being a big man, you'd be in this up to your eyeballs. Gus told me what he knew about it last night. Things being like what they are between you and Fayette, I'd take his word over Fayette. But take a word of advice: Don't be manufacturing your own laws. If you want to sell lots on that land, you'll have to sue, now, to get it back. Am I plain enough?"

Johnny put on his hat, relighted his cigarette, and stared into the morning street. "I guess," he said. He went out.

At the bank, he plastered a mortgage on his land for two thousand dollars. He deposited this to Hendershott's account. Then he walked to the land office. McCallum was at the courthouse with most of the other lawyers and land agents in town, but Hester, cool and aloof, was there. Johnny regarded her. ". . . All right," he said, "you told me so. We've got that taken care of. Now, what did you want to see me about?"

She gave her attention to some papers on the spindle. "One thing I didn't want to say," she remarked, "was 'I told you so.' Now that we've got *that* taken care of—it's too late anyway! Somebody else has beaten you to the punch.

"We found something interesting in the grant-book. Your title wasn't inviolate. If it had ever been brought to a trial, we'd have known it long ago. But that alley between your place and Donley's doesn't belong to either of you! It's never been included in *any* grant! It was open for

filing . . . and who do you think filed?"

Johnny said, "Not that it makes any difference—"

"GUS HENDERSHOTT. Pop was the one who found out about it, and when we heard what you'd done to him, we tipped him off before the rush started. He'll live in the line shack on Gunsight Creek, he says. All he has to do now is to wait for the railroad to make him a rich man."

"He won't have to wait that long. That's Donley's land. They'll hammer on a dishpan outside the window some night and Honest Gus will run all the way back to Ladd and Fairchild. I guess you knew there never was such an outfit," he added.

"He told me. But I don't see that it excuses you. He was willing to work to learn the trade."

"I'm not teaching livestock husbandry this semester," Johnny said. He placed his hat on the side of his head and gave her a hand salute. "Thanks for everything, Hester."

She came around the counter angrily. "I don't know why you think you don't have to live by the laws other men do. What will it take to convince you?"

Johnny said, "What you nor anybody else understands is that I'm not looking for trouble. But I won't dodge it, and I won't be bled white by lawsuits."

He saw moisture form in her eyes and her lips lose their steadiness. The hard mind of his stubbornness dissolved; he took her face between his hands. When am I going to be ranching that land with you, Hester?"

"The way things are going—never. Oh, Johnny—" She pressed her face against his shoulder. He held her a moment, patting her and wanting to make a lot of promises he could not keep.

"I'm just a thick-headed cattleman," he said. "All I know is how to hang and rattle. I know that if I went to court and lost, I'd be out for sure. But if I won't agree to live by their tinhorn laws until the state or somebody takes a hand here, then I've still got my slate clean. If I've got any plan, that's it."

Riding back that night, he felt how unstable such a plan was. The time had come and gone when he should have asked help of the same authorities he derided.

He reached a decision before he reached the home place. He would get a lawyer and do some eleventh-hour figuring.

The place looked pretty quiet. He missed Gus' deep, friendly talk. The corral appeared lonely for his loose-jointed livery crowbait. A finger of guilt prodded him. He had not warned Hendershott about the possibility of trouble with Coke Donley when he teamed up with him. And wasn't that a liability as great as Gus' ineptitude with a rope and iron?

He threw off the rawhide latch and went into the cabin, thinking, I'll have to air this shack out. It stank of Hendershott's defunct cigars. He lighted the whale-oil lamp, and stood there still holding the match, the light thrown upward across his face, looking at the man tipped back in a chair against the wall.

CHAPTER THREE

"I'll Give You Five Minutes!"

DONLEY clutched a cold cigar in his teeth. His short, ponderous body made the chair-legs that supported him appear ridiculously frail; deep-chested and thick of limb, it was hard to imagine anything but a bull ever stopping him. And yet he still wore some facial scars from his tangle with Johnny. A faint querulousness was in his eyes.

"People," he said, "have gone crazy."

"Where'd you leave your horse?" Johnny asked.

"Behind the shack. Have a drink." He pulled a bottle from his pocket and tossed it to Gaines. "Land laws just don't mean a damned thing any more."

"No," Johnny agreed, "they don't. What do you want, Coke?"

Donley sighed unhappily. "First I have to wrangle with you. Then they spring this no-man's-land proposition. What are we going to do about Hendershott?"

"He's on your land. What are *you* going to do about him?"

"I've been trying to decide. It might look better," said Donley, "if we acted together. I'm sick of court wrangling. The judge gave me title to that strip of yours, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll split it

with you. Then there won't be any chawing on it. And you and I will put Hendershott off together."

Johnny built a fire in the sheet-metal stove and sliced some spuds. "Hendershott ain't going to hurt you," he said. "He's practically an old man. What are you afraid of?"

"I ain't afraid of anybody. But if we let him get away with this, every saddle bum in Texas is going to study around till he finds a chunk of land he can claim. Johnny, you and I have got to give that velvet-collared tramp a lesson they'll hear about clean to Austin!"

"As I get it," Johnny said, "you're a law-abiding man as long as you can set in its shade. But when it starts to scorch you, you get your hackles up. And you've even got the guts to try to suck me into doing your dirty work! Everybody knows Gus and I have split up. I've got a notion he wouldn't come out of this lesson we're going to give him. But nobody in Shevlin County would know a thing about it when the inquest came. So who would they hang it on?"

Donley got up. He recovered his pint. He shook it and thoughtfully frowned at the bubbles. Then he dropped it in his pocket.

"Forget about it. But don't forget and start running cattle on my land again. Next time, you and I will have real trouble, Gaines. And I won't send a bungler like Tate Castro."

THE line-shack was a ten-by-ten coop on the side of a ravine. Hackberries shaded it deeply and distilled their pungency into the night. It was drafty, and for cooking facilities offered only a shallow corner fireplace with a cross-bar and a couple of pot-hooks. Here Gus Hendershott boiled the carcass of a rabbit he had shot. He sighed, dreaming of riverboat meals: a dozen entrees, ten desserts, liqueurs and endless small cups of coffee.

Yet he was a little proud of himself, fitting into this country as well as he had. All the saddle-stiffness was gone and he had done a fair job of throwing a hitch on that mule he'd bought. He had provisions for a month. He aimed to use them, too. Hank Fayette had talked to him in vague fashion just before he left town, but it came down to the fact that he had better expect to fight if he wanted to keep that postage stamp ranch of his. Hendershott had let him know he would.

But he had not expected trouble so soon as this; and listening to the harsh rattle of stones from the trail, he wondered if Donley were paying him a visit tonight. The only gun he possessed was the new shotgun. He opened the door quickly and set it outside: He did not want to have to step out with a gun in his hand if he were hailed. On the other hand, he wanted it close by.

The horses came closer; there seemed to be four or five. A man's voice separated out of the nervous trampling of hoofs. "Hendershott!" It sounded like Coke Donley.

He went out. The shotgun was a foot to his right, by the washstand. The men had dismounted; they approached with a hard jangle of spurs. There were four. He knew only Donley and Fayette.

"Maybe you'd better stay back a little," Hendershott said.

They came on. He was hesitant about grabbing at the gun. Donley stopped four feet from him. A faint warmth of light from the cabin ruddied his heavy-boned face. He looked both contemptuous and eager.

"You dirty river-rat!" he said suddenly. "You should have left your marked decks on the boat when you landed here. Didn't you get what Fayette was saying?"

Hendershott was scared and angry. He said tersely, "You got what the land agent said, didn't you? You were inside the law last week. You're outside it tonight."

Donley snorted. "I'm giving you five minutes."

"I'm giving *you*—" Hendershott began.

Donley's fist traveled. Hendershott partially ducked it, took the jolt on his ear and backed into the doorjamb. His hand groped for the gun.

Fayette yelled. "Scattergun!" He dived at the man. Hendershott cuffed him off, but the other punchers came at him from the other side and he was knocked down. Men swarmed all over him, slugging and kicking. He was dazed and hurt when he heard Donley's command: "Stand him up!"

He saw the rancher's face, contorted

with anger, and then all things were blotted out by the explosion of pain in his head.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wipeout at Bullshead

IT WAS about eleven the next morning when Johnny Gaines heard a horse coming down off the ridge. He was cutting wood and stood with the axe laid back across his shoulder to watch a rider inexpertly bring his pony through the brush and, crossing the spring branch, enter the yard. He saw that it was Gus Hendershott but why he recognized him, he wasn't sure. Only the horse was the same.

Hendershott sat the horse there a few yards away, too sick to dismount. His face was cut, scabbed. His clothes were torn and dirty and he had a curious lopsided expression.

"My God, Gus!" Johnny reached up to help him down.

Hendershott said thickly, "You missed some fun, Gaines. They were chivareein' the tenderfoot last night. I missed you."

He resisted Johnny's effort to help him down. ". . . . Who did this? Donley?"

"A bunch of the boys." Gus reached to steady himself against the pommel, missed and fell half across the saddle-fork. Johnny was able to let him down without much resistance. Gus swayed against his horse. "You're sick!" Johnny insisted. "Come on inside."

Hendershott was only half making sense, now. ". . . Whole county's sick. Needs doctor. Doctor Gustave Hendershott. May have operate." He crumbled into Johnny's arms.

He came around while Johnny was making thin soup out of barley and boiled beef. Seeing the whiskey Johnny had left at hand, he drank it. Johnny found it painful to look at him, to reflect that he had booted Hendershott into this brutality. A lot of thoughts shouldered through his head. . . . He carried the soup to the ex-gambler. Hendershott drank a little and then sat with his face buried in his hands.

Johnny sat on the cot by him, rolled and lighted a cigarette and put it in his fingers. "Damn it, Gus!" he said, and he had a crazy urge to cry. "You still got that money I put in the bank for you?"

"Didn't know you did."

"Then how about making it a joint account? This no-man's-land is still yours. Don't let anybody tell you different. But I've been studying on this, and I don't see why you and me couldn't hit it off on the rest of my land, like before."

"You don't need my kind of help. I can do card tricks, tell a bluff from a royal flush and kiss a lady's hand. But I'll be ten years making a cowman."

Johnny touched the square toes of his boots together. "You're leavin' out, then?"

"No. I said this county was sick. Marshal Coyner's got what it needs, but nobody will let him prescribe. But I'm going to. I'm going to drag Fayette and Donley to him and prefer charges for assault and battery."

Johnny slapped his knee. "Gus, you've got a heluva sense of humor. Do you know what it would take to carry those babies to the marshal?"

"One double-barreled eight-gauge shotgun. Then I'm going back and make a fort out of that line-shack, and buy a pack of hounds that'll eat the hip pockets out of anybody that comes coyotin' around. I never felt so affectionate towards anything as I do that land since I took a licking for it."

He looked at Johnny with a splinter of eye showing through the puffy, pink flesh. Johnny poked him affectionately. "Let's take 'em in together, hey?"

"If you ain't afraid."

"Tomorrow, then," Johnny said. "I figure they may be in town anyhow. We'll swing by the ranch and hit Pecan Point if they aren't there."

Johnny inspected his gun after he was asleep. It was birdshot; he reckoned a heavier load might be better for such birds as Coke Donley and Hank Fayette. And it was just possible he might have to wing them to take them in. He replaced the seed with bits of metal from the smithy.

DONLEY and his ramrod weren't at the ranch. The sleepy cowpoke who met them said he thought they were in town with the lawyer. Hendershott stared at him as if trying to recognize him, but didn't. A few minutes after they had jogged on, however, they saw the dust of

a rider leading them toward Pecan Point. The surprise element was lost.

About noon they came across the last hill and saw the fumes of the town in the late autumn air. Timing began to tick in Johnny's head. "I've been thinking," he told Gus, "that it might be a good thing to take Coyner with us. How about that?"

"And have them saying the tinhorn can't shovel his own corral sweepings? I'm going to take them in. That's the one way I can hurt them the way they hurt me. To march them down the street with their hands in the air and turn them over to the marshal." There was a vicious twist to his swollen lips.

"Okay. Only don't count on that hands angle too much."

"Frankly," Hendershott said, "I don't."

Then they were passing the coal yard and the Lone Star Hotel, and the buildings grew up fast around them, giving them a wide and bare alley to ride. It was Saturday, but a very quiet one. A lot of horses were chewing the hitch racks, but most of the riders were off the street. It had not been so long since the Justifier-Moderator feud, and a lot of men right here in town had been on raiding parties. Only the wildest found them a satisfaction. Most of them preferred to punch cattle.

The Bullshead Saloon seemed to be where Hendershott was heading. He was not a man to know one horse from another, but Johnny was. Three Wineglass horses from Donley's string stood before it. "He'd probably be at the lawyer's," Johnny said hurriedly. "You might head over that way—it's above the bank—while I duck in at Hester's for a minute."

Gus reined over to the saloon rack. "You wouldn't be meaning Coyner's, now? Shall we go in together, or how?"

Johnny sighed. "It don't matter how we go in. They're going to be waiting for us. That horse dripping slobber, yonder, belongs to the puncher we talked to at the ranch. S'pose I go in first. I haven't had a real fuss with him, yet. He might punch one right through your belt-buckle."

He looked at Hendershott as he dismounted. The man was sick with anticipation. He had never done a thing like this in his life, but he had made up his mind to do it. He was taking the shotgun from the boot and pulling the hammers back; and then he cleared his throat and looked at Johnny as if to say something. But he only shook his head and blew out his cheeks. "Well," he said. . . .

JOHNNY left his gun holstered but cocked. He brushed the slotted green half-doors apart and hesitated there, trying to see everything at once. Donley and

DEATH RAMRODS the TRIANGLE B

Lawman Snowy Roberts had one friend—a salty brand-artist!

Novel by WALT COBURN

—and—

Jud Schuyler rode into Shawmut Bow to

BRAND A BROTHER KILLER!

Novelette by ROE RICHMOND

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

—also—

Novelettes and shorts by Robert L. Trimnell, T. W. Ford, and others—in the thrill-packed July issue . . . on sale June 10th.

Fayette sat together at a table, drinking beer and playing cards. A revolver lay on the table between them. The sleepy-looking puncher from the ranch had a place at the bar to Gaines' right. Johnny walked over and stood a few feet from him. The cowboy kept staring at Donley as if asking for further instructions.

Donley did not stop flipping cards. "Who's your friend?" he asked.

"The man with the face?" Johnny said. "We call him Laughing Boy. I think he's got a joke to tell."

Hendershott came right to it. He walked six feet inside the saloon and stopped. His head was down like that of a puzzled bull. He let the shotgun point at a knothole in the floor about half way between him and the table. Some men at a table behind Donley quietly got up and tried to walk, rather than run, out of line.

"Get up!" he said. "The two of you. Get up and come over here."

"Why, by God, Hank!" Donley laughed. "It's Wild Bill Hickok!"

A shotgun was a morbid affair. Donley gave every evidence of nervousness and surprise. He must know how bitterly Hendershott hated him, Johnny thought, and he must know too that if he walked down the street with his hands in the air he would never walk in this town again, except to be laughed at. Arrested by a river tinhorn! And the position he coveted demanded that everything he say or do be taken with the greatest soberness.

"I'm going to count five," said Hendershott, "and then fire."

Donley looked at the man near Johnny. He tilted his chin as if to loosen the fat neck inside his collar. "Okay," he said. He started to rise.

The puncher flung his beer into Johnny Gaines's face. He sank to his knees and pulled his Colt, staring at Hendershott, Hendershott swerved, and Johnny cried out. A shot at the cowboy would kill Johnny, too. Hendershott held it, but a look of confusion struck through his eyes. He swung back to Donley, and now Coke Donley and Hank Fayette were both in action. It was Donley's gun which lay on the table. He seized it and tipped the table over in front of them.

Johnny kicked at the puncher's gun hand. He connected solidly with his wrist. The first shot of that crazy, confused instant broke the dead air shatteringly. It went out a window into the street. Johnny drew his Colt and now the cowpoke was diving at him. He swiveled and smashed at his face with the barrel of it.

There was a monstrous explosion of sound which illuminated the whole saloon for an instant and deafened each man there. Hendershott reeled from the kick of the eight-gauge. Fayette went down with half his breast sheered off.

Donley got his shot. The bloody apparition of Hank Fayette's death had shaken him. He fired a foot to Hendershott's right and stood there trying to fire the single-action Colt again without cocking.

Johnny steadied and let his shot go. Donley's strong-limbed body fought it. He was mortally hit in the chest, but seemed to channel all his strength into the task of remaining on his feet. He staggered away from the table. His gun hung from his trigger finger. He leaned on the back of a chair and stared blindly at Johnny. Then he fell.

Hendershott was the color of a bucket of lard. Johnny took him by the shoulder and marched him into the street. "I—I guess we ought to tell Marshal Coyner about it," Gus said.

"I reckon that would be the place to start." They walked down the street.

Hendershott shambled along uncertainly. "Is it going to be worth it, Johnny? Worth remembering how—how Fayette looked?"

"He didn't look a lot worse than you do right now," Johnny said.

"I hope we don't have any trouble squaring this with Coyner."

"That's not what worries me. How am I going to square it with Hester? Will you back me up if I say I was suckered?"

"Why, sure!" Hendershott said. "Pulling the wool over people's eyes has always been a talent of mine. But I finally got tired of pulling it over my own."

And Johnny Gaines thought that Hendershott was not the only one who had had that talent. It had cost him some bad days to lose it, but compared to what it had cost some other men, the bargain was cheap.

HELL ON A HORSE!

By

ROD PATTERSON

Rocky Malvern knew he hadn't the guts to ride that man-killer, Python, but he held the rep of pro bronc-buster—and every friend he knew had bet his bottom dollar on Rocky to win!

ROCKY MALVERN didn't hurry himself, riding Music down the last few dusty miles toward the valley. In a way of speaking he had his tail up and was singin' at the sun. Rocky was coming home. From the humpback ridge he viewed the broad sweep of the basin that rolled from the pale blue hills on the west to the hard straight line of the horizon on the east. It was no trouble at all raising the buildings of Sam Dugger's big horse spread down there in morning haze or, five miles farther on, the tank and windmill of the Whitlock cow ranch shimmering in April sunlight. And he saw the dust, like a small tumbleweed, traveling steadily along the Calf Creek trail. His heart did a whing-ding because

Rocky went flying

that dust might very well be Cora Whitlock on her calico galloping out to welcome him.

Forking Music, his fast-stepping Morgan mare, down the familiar trail was just about the finest thing that could happen to a man. Home country lay below him, soft hills, green meadows, tall timber, with the pale green lines of cottonwoods and wild willows marking off the water courses. He allowed as how it was the purtiest sight he'd ever seen. Even California couldn't peel hide to this.

But there was one small cloud of worry on his mind: If he could only be sure what sort of a welcome he was going to get from Big Bart Whitlock, Cora's dad, he'd feel a whole lot easier in his mind.

The trouble was, he could look back to that day, three years ago, when he'd taken leave of Double Dollar, and remember as though it was yesterday the names Big Bart had called him. In themselves "scissor-bill, saddle tramp, knothead" weren't much to get riled about, but it was the way Bart had said 'em, like a whupping with a blacksnake whip.

It was a comfort, anyways, to know that Cora didn't share the old man's venomous opinions. At their final parting, down behind the pump house under the winking Texas stars, Cora had clung to him like an ivy vine, kissing him so her hat fell off and bobbed on her back on the rawhide bonnet strings.

"He says you're just plumb no account," she'd wailed, "and you'll never come back and I better perk up to Sam Dugger or die an old maid! But, Rocky, I'll just plain die if you go away!"

"Don't you fret none, honey." He'd felt tall enough to pluck at the moon. "Soon's I make my pile I'll mosey home."

Well, he hadn't made any pile. He'd started with a hundred bucks and now was broke—or just about—but now he had a chastened respect for an hombre that stayed in the home corral and saved his money and his dreams.

WELL, of course he had Music and the duds he wore—as pretty a set of visitin' harness as a man could want: a larrupin' big Belgian belly Stetson with a snakeskin band, sky-blue silk shirt and a scarf as yellow as new corn cobs, a pair of forty dollar Justins, white-piped and trimmed with stars, and a set of silver-steel Crocketts with hand-buffed shanks and daisy rowels. His saddle was worth three months' foreman's pay. He'd won the outfit during a session of cut-throat stud in a town called Indian Springs, from a professional show rider called the Canadian Kid.

"With that luck," the bronc-buster had paid disgusted tribute, "you must of stepped in a little somethin' somewheres!"

Rocky had allowed as how a change of luck wouldn't make him proddy none and that he sure hoped she'd string along a piece because pretty soon he was going to need some more.

So far as he knew he was still running in that lucky streak. He had fine thoughts about himself, too. After all he was a better than average rider and a fair rope hand. Any buggy boss ought to be plumb tickled to hire back as good a dally man. What of it if he'd wasted three years on the road? Though maybe he hadn't gathered any moss he sure had accumulated some polish.

But—and he didn't want to dig too deeply into this—suppose Big Bart Whitlock should cuss him down and kick him off the spread? That, he had to admit, would be plumb bad. Account of all the other ranchmen in the basin being friends of Bart's, his chances of dabbing his loop on a riding job would be slimmer than a tick's hind leg—unless he went back to farming it.

Good God! Anything but that!

Rocky's father had been one of the few sodbusters in the basin, a sad, respected, hard-working man who just happened to be born on the wrong side of the barbed wire fence. Rocky had stuck to him on the farm until he died, and now the memory was there like an old lament played on a fiddle: long dull back-breaking days walking a furrow behind a bull-tongue plow and a team of Spanish mules; weeks, months, years grubbing out sage and planting crops by hand-time as gray in retrospect as the thousands of bowls of grits he'd had to down since his button days.

And now the banks had taken over the homestead farm. Rocky had never gone back. Life had been simple then, but he'd

let them take the works because he couldn't begin to love the soil enough to grind it under his fingernails.

Well, shucks, he'd better be thinking of pleasant things—about Cora, for instance. He thought about her and the way he thought about her made the sun shine even brighter. She was as pretty as a ten cent postage stamp just licked, with her hair the exact color of the cutest bay horse you ever saw, red-brown and shooting sparks of fire with sunlight in it. When she looked this-away and that-away the same sparks danced in her eyes and they were lupine-blue and her mouth was as red as an occatillo bud.

Three years was a heap of waiting and hoping for a girl. He'd promised on his oath to come back to her, long ago—when her departing kiss was half a sob that he remembered with a catch in his heart.

It won't be long, he thought, and touched the Morgan with his Crockett spurs. Now he was loping along the basin trail, and Music's fast-stepping hoofs made a drumbeat for a hero's coming-home.

That dust ball was coming toward him over a rise. He saw the pony and then the girl. Cora, honey!

They met on the trail and the dust showered down upon them and the sun caught particles of the dust and made them wink as it rolled. Rocky leaned over his saddle-horn and his grin was as big as life and twice as natural. And then he stared.

"Hullo," she said, and that was all!

He felt like a trout just flipped from the creek, flat and empty and surprised. They met each other's eyes across the gap between their horses and nobody said anything for a long time.

She had changed, he saw. Oh, plenty! Looks, manner, everything. Something stirred inside him, that same old pang he'd had before about being far away from home.

He sat back on Music and couldn't make himself believe what his eyes were looking at. "Well," he finally managed to drawl in a voice that wasn't his, "didn't you get my letter?"

Her hair was the same red-brown he remembered but it looked different, kind of neat, not blowing every which-away. The blue of her eyes was the same but the sparks had gone. She was taller, calmer, more filled out. She was woman-dressed.

"Sure, I got your letter," he heard her voice again, soft and smooth and slow but as cool as a morning breeze. "The mails still run."

HE WAS baffled, bewildered, chilled. Their eyes met steadily, like strangers almost, or maybe friendly enemies, gauging, measuring, sizing each other up. "Oh," he said and coughed and cleared his throat.

"How's tricks?" she inquired, polite as poison.

"Middlin' fair."

She gave him that tucked-in smile. "Heading for the ranch?"

"I'd aimed to, sorta."

"Calf round-up's over," she said, "and dad's laying off the winter hands."

He looked at her. "Yeah?"

That smile again, and the tone like quirting a man across the face. "Your old homestead's been dug out of the weeds and put up for sale again." A pause like a lighted fuse. Then: "There's money in farming now."

He took it without a blink, but a wave of heat rushed up from his bandanna and burned his hat brim. "You don't say?" It was a long time coming but it was good when it came because he got all the mockery in it he'd meant to. And then he felt a stab of shame. He saw that in her leveled gaze that was her unvoiced scorn at the clothes he wore, like she wanted to tell him that it took more to make a man than wearing stars on his duds and forking an expensive horse. But could he help it if other gals kind of cottoned to his looks and his horse? Vanity tightened his nerves again. Then he saw her lift her reins and start her calico, and he heard her say, "Be seein' you, bronco-buster. Don't pull any leather."

He had to hip way around in his saddle to watch her ride away. He came all apart with anger then. It took him quite a while to get himself in hand again. He rode on, thinking with blank incredulity: Looked at me like I was sheep dip with the cover off! And then: Why, I don't even know why I'm comin' home! A man couldn't

raise a beard on forty a month and found!

A whoop and a holler later he rode into the broad cottonwood-shaded yard at Double Dollar. He was chagrined to see a gallery of spectators watching his entrance like the grand marshal of a Frontier Day parade.

The five-man crew stood and sat in front of the bunkhouse, and when they saw it was him they doubled up with a loud hooraw of laughter. Nearby stood Big Bart Whitlock himself, talking to two men in a pole buggy drawn by a span of matched blacks. The man holding the lines was the dark-visaged Sam Dugger, the horse rancher. The fellow on the seat next to Sam was a stranger, a fat, balding man who looked like a drygoods drummer.

Rocky tried to hold Music down but the Morgan seemed to want to dance. The crew howled and cheered and went through the motions in pantomime of a brass band playing a march.

Hot-faced and angry, Rocky finally dismounted and waited for the uproar to die down. It was Big Bart who stopped the horseplay and demanded in a loud voice what Rocky thought he was doing in such an outrageous rig, what he wanted at Double Dollar, and had he turned horse thief, and if so he better keep going before the sheriff caught up with him.

During those brief moments, all of them bad for Rocky, Sam Dugger sat in his buggy, grinning sardonically, a look in his black eyes that was like an insult. It was hard to take.

Rocky finally got a word in edgewise and told Big Bart he wanted to go to work at his old job.

"In that outfit?" bellowed the ranchman. "What d'you think I'm runnin'? A tent show for freaks?"

THE fat stranger then came to life. He clambered out of the buggy and came toward Rocky with an outstretched hand. "Howdy, kid," he said with high-pitched affability and a trace of a whiskey breath. "Sure glad to see you again."

Watchful, Rocky took the hand, not speaking.

"I was over at Indian Springs that day," the man said. "I saw you ride that red horse at the rodeo." He kept pumping Rocky's hand with pink-faced enthusiasm. "I'm Harry Engle, stock-buyer from Fort Worth."

Rocky was mystified. He thought they were running a sandy on him.

The fat man looked around at the others, saying, "Gents, here you're seein' the Canadian Kid, a genuine smoke-tanned, hand-wove bronc-snapper from the big time. I thought it was him when I seen that blue shirt and the Morgan comin' over the rise. He rode a wild 'un over at the Beech County Fair. Four men got throwed for a loop before he done it. I bet a hundred on him at ten to one and cleaned them jaspers out." He turned back and clapped Rocky on the shoulder, beaming, "Son, I figure I owe you about a hundred bucks for that ride—kind of a commission. Tried to find you after the show that day but you'd lit a shuck." He forked out a roll of bills and peeled off ten tens, pressing the bills into Rocky's hand.

Rocky went hot and then cold. He tried to look modest and murmured something, he wasn't sure what.

Sam Dugger was watching the scene from his buggy and his grin had disappeared. He was frowning now. A comical change had come over the crew, over Big Bart Whitlock. The boys clambered off the corral rail and came forward in a hangdog way. Big Bart beat them to Rocky and shook hands, a look of grudging admiration on his brick-dust-colored face.

"I'll be durned!" the big man said in a snorty voice. "So you did amount to somethin' after all. Unsaddle your hoss, Rocky. I won't hear of your ridin' off this spread."

For the next few minutes there was a lot of hooraw and back-slapping with Rocky trying to back away. During the hubbub Cora rode in and her father told her about Rocky and the bucking horse at Indian Wells, and Cora looked at Rocky with sharper interest but still with no friendliness. Meanwhile Sam Dugger and Engle had driven off.

"One time I mistook a man," Big Bart said in a tone that was humble for him. "Rocky, welcome home!"

They all laughed and admired him except Cora. She turned her back and went in the house. Rocky felt slightly sick.

He was the same as a liar and a fraud.

Later he off-saddled Music and rubbed him down and then made himself comfortable in the bunkhouse. After lunch old Gramp Lankerwell, the foreman, took him out to the horse pasture and let him choose his own string of ponies. "Anything you want, Rocky," the old man grinned. "Just holler."

He was the white-haired boy around Double Dollar from then on, and it made him squirm to think how he'd come to let such a thing happen to people he liked. And everytime somebody asked him about professional riding, he buttoned his lip and ducked. They put it down for modesty.

He tried repeatedly to get Cora alone so he could explain, tell her the truth, but she was as good at ducking as he was. By the time a week had passed it was too late to do anything but hope they'd forget what he was supposed to be.

Harry Engle had been a bit likkered, of course, and one thing was sure: he'd take care not to meet the man again when his eyesight might be steadier. And he'd stay away from Indian Wells where he'd won the Canadian Kid's outfit.

He wished he could shuck himself of all of it and start over, just being what he was—a cowboy.

AFTER supper one night, Rocky Injuned up on Cora and got close enough to say "howdy." She was sitting in the gallery swing, dressed for town, and reading, or pretending to read, a book.

Rocky slithered up on the porch and camped on the top step in an offhand way. And he anted up before she could cut and run. "Corrie," he said, making it as calm and steady as he could, "ain't it about time me and you got down to cases and threshed this out?"

She put down her book and looked at him through the shadows, and he felt the ice begin to freeze. "What's to thresh out?"

"Nothin'," he answered harshly, "except I'm wolf bait in this camp."

"It seems to me," she said, sweet as larrup, "you're kind of popular."

If she'd chosen to rile up at him he could have stood it better, but this don't-come-too-close manner was running his bootheels over. "Oh, come off it, Corrie!" he said in a snappish tone.

There was a pause and then she murmured, "Rocky, I liked you better as you were."

He almost fell over his own boots trying to stand up so he could get to her because her voice didn't have ice any more—it had a hurt. But just then Sam Dugger drove into the yard in his plush-seated buggy and spoiled everything.

"Ev'ning, Cora. Oh, howdy, Malvern," Sam said, getting out with a smug and arrogant grin on his sunburned face. "Ready, Cora? Say, Malvern, you're the man I want to see. I've got a horse I'd like to have you try. A little wild, but you're the one can tame him down for me."

Rocky said, through hate in his voice, "I ride for Double Dollar, Sam."

The screen door creaked and Big Bart eased out on the gallery. "Why, that's all right, Rocky," the ranchman said. "Any time you want to pick up a fee, just go ahead. It'll be a feather in my cap."

Cora passed Rocky, going down to Sam. He saw her sudden sideways glance and there wasn't anything very sweet about it. Sam helped her into his buggy and then she said brightly, "I think it's a good idea. And why not make it a real show—invite the basin people?" It sounded like she was talking about her wedding day. "Sam's lower pasture'd make an ideal spot for it."

Rocky felt like a man tied to a post with Injun arrows sticking into him. He didn't know how he could possibly get out of it and save his face. They seemed to be waiting for his reply. Finally he growled, "What's this horse? Some loco colt?"

Sam laughed and the sound galled Rocky worse than blazes. "Colt? Why, he's a three-year-old, Malvern. A sorrel with Satan in his soul!"

"Python?" Big Bart wanted to know.

"That's right," said Sam, staring hard at Rocky.

Rocky felt empty, with a taste like too many Mexican cigars in his mouth. He thought of stalling, then knew it was useless. "All right," he said sullenly. And he turned and walked away.

Within the next few days the word went out about Sam Dugger's show he was go-

ing to hold the last Saturday in April. Rocky considered rolling his tail for other parts, but something happened that put an end to that. Cora asked him one morning to ride with her. That was a mistake. They rode into the hills, with the sun warming them and slowly thawing Cora out.

They hadn't spoken to each other since leaving the ranch, and Rocky didn't mind. It seemed fine just having her there beside him again, like before he'd gone away. He felt a new excitement now about her that he didn't want to bother about reasoning out in his mind.

He finally reined up Music and edged toward her. Their eyes met. But when he started to dismount, she moved her pony quickly toward the back-trail.

"I want to talk to you," he said, determined suddenly to make his confession.

"You can talk."

"I talk better standin'."

She shook her head slowly and her hair caught sunlight and sparked the way he liked it. "You'd better stay on your horse."

"Corrie," he pleaded, "don't act thisaway. We was kids together."

SHE watched him for a long moment and then slowly got off her calico. His confidence leaped up. He nodded toward the shade of a greasewood seep and she followed him and they both sat on the ground, a little way apart. There was color in her cheeks—her eyes had little flecks of blue in them. "Corrie," he began, "I know now I was loco for leavin' the valley like I done."

Her glance stayed on his gravely, contemplatively. "Well, I wouldn't say that," she replied in a very soft tone. "When a man can make a name for himself in just three years—"

He made a wry grimace. "Shucks, what's that amount to? I'm just a cowboy." He reached out impulsively and took her small gloved hand.

At his touch she jerked back, and then she jumped up. She said, tightly, "Do you see those horses over there?" and pointed with her hand.

He stared at her, then glanced over his shoulder. Not far off he saw the kind of enclosed pen ranchmen sometimes use to hold small bunches of cattle during a gather. In the barbed-wire enclosure were about a dozen ponies, half-wild animals of the range waiting to be driven to headquarters and saddle-broken.

He rose to his feet. "Yeah, I see 'em."

She was breathing faster and her eyes held a sudden quick eagerness. "Rocky, let me see you ride that buckskin."

He stared at her, startled. Then he understood. She was giving him his chance to stand or fall before her. She knew he was a fraud and had called his bluff.

"Okay," he said quietly. Strangely, at the moment he felt equal to almost anything.

The buckskin was only a run-of-the-mill bronc, skittish as a cat but not savage. He cornered the beast without much trouble by backing it into the wire and throwing his loop with a quick flip of the wrist. As a kid he had ridden ponies bare-backed with only a rope hackamore. He thought he could carry it off with this one with even better grace and authority.

When the hackamore was on, though, he saw that the buckskin was going to be difficult. It was wilder than he'd thought at first. But he had to go through with it now, with Cora standing behind him across the wire.

A moment ago he had been ready to tell her why he'd come to get tangled in that Canadian Kid business and why he'd let the lie build up. But now it was too late. He wasn't going to back down from the test she had rigged, and so he bit down on his teeth and made a flying mount.

At first he held the hackamore so tightly and drawn back so hard the buckskin couldn't get its hammer head down and only circled like a tomcat with a hood over its eyes. He hoped that in a moment the horse would quiet down and stay that way, but it didn't. He let the rope slip a notch because Cora was onto such tricks, and then it happened.

The buckskin's head went down with a snap between its fore fetlocks and the animal leaped high in the air. The following jolt warped Rocky's spine and almost unseated him. But he hung on with both knees and thighs and by gripping hackamore and burrmatted mane. He took the next three jumps in fine style,

but then came the devilish twist and turn and double-back, all of it happening on a spot no bigger than a table-top. Rocky went flying.

HEAT, dust, noise, crying kids, gabbing women, laughing men — these were meat and drink to a show rider. But Rocky Malvern honed for solitude.

Like a man doomed he had started putting his affairs in order three days before Sam Dugger's picnic and rodeo. He had gone to town and had sent a money order for one hundred dollars to the Canadian Kid, care of the State Summer Circuit Rodeo Association. Engle, the stock-buyer, had paid the sum to Rocky out of gratitude. Rocky was unloading the money for reasons of conscience and the need for a good night's sleep.

The afternoon of the shindig Rocky delayed in the bunkhouse as long as he dared. They had fussed over him, bragged over him, worried about him and then had all gone off ahead of him—the crew, Big Bart, Cora. Only Gramp Lankerwell was left behind as a guard of honor.

Now they were riding together on the trail. In the distance, April dust rolled like surf around Sam Dugger's lower pasture. As they drew closer, they could see the crowd spread out under the cottonwoods and willows, the rows of ranch rigs and saddle horses ranked up behind the massive silver-painted barns.

"It's a turnout," commented Gramp as he jogged along. "Half the county's over there, my boy. Makes an old wreck like me feel kind of glum. Never git old and wore out, son."

"I won't," said Rocky, and firmly believed it.

"They've took ten per cent of all the bets and put up a prize," the foreman continued. "Two thousand bucks ain't baled hay!"

Rocky veered shocked eyes at the old man. "You mean—"

"Sam Dugger's wagerin' two to one his hoss'll throw you into the next county. Engle's put up two thousand you'll stick and us boys pooled a month's wages and backed him up. I don't know how much Bart drawed out of the bank—"

"E,e,e—yi!" groaned Rocky, and ducked his head.

There was a surcingle race going on when they rode down the lane and dismounted in the rear of the yelling crowd. Nobody noticed Rocky as he slunk around toward the judges' post under a cottonwood. If he could have found a hole big enough he would plumb gladly have crawled into it for the rest of the afternoon.

He saw Big Bart and Cora and the crew and they saw him, and Bart came over and took his arm like a father who wanted to give advice. "A saddle blanket cinch, Rocky," the big man laughed. "This Python's tough but you've rode tougher, accordin' to the records I been readin' up."

Rocky didn't hear any more. Confusion reigned on the flats for a while and then they were leading Dugger's sorrel in from the corrals. He felt like a man hammer-hit, stunned. He didn't look at Cora. He tried not to look at anybody. He stood aside, a grave tall man in levis and cotton shirt, the levis rolled up above the tops of his old scuffed boots and his spurs.

He heard someone say, "Oh, it's a pretty bad horse. Nobody's ever stuck longer'n three jumps. Busted one man's back and tromped another some!"

Rocky sweated. He swiped dust out of his eyes and when he opened them he saw Cora standing before him. She was white-lipped, tense, and very beautiful.

"Don't ride him, Rocky!" she breathed. "He's a killer!"

He stared at her as if sighting down along a rifle barrel. Then anger and shame rose in him. He wanted more from her than just not wanting to see him humiliated and hurt. He wanted a whole lot more, and knew he could never have it now. He had realized that the day she had stood and laughed when the buckskin tossed him twenty feet into a cactus patch.

The crowd roared. Rocky snarled, "Don't fret yourself. I know what I'm doin'."

Three handlers were pulling Python into the open and having trouble. The horse, a sleek powerful animal with beautiful lines, kept trying to paw them with his forefeet. They had blinders on him but his hoofs kept slashing out and he was mad clean through.

Rocky saw this and thought, I may get killed. This is murder!

HE NEVER remembered walking out across the arena and stopping near the horse. And he didn't hear the cheering of the crowd.

His hands were cold and his mouth was dry and a sickness started in the hollow between his ribs. He stared at Python's rippling, shining hide, at the play of mighty ligaments beneath the quivering vital flesh, at the scarlet fear-widened nostrils. He placed both hands on the saddle-horn, bent his knees, and hit the tree as smooth as silk.

He hauled in a breath. "Let 'm go!"

The blinders snapped off with a tearing sound.

The sorrel stood statue-still except for a tremor in its legs. Rocky swung his spurs. The horse broke out of its tracks like an unleashed, uncoiling spring. It made two forward jumps, then rose in the air, all four hoofs tucked together, and came down with a crash.

Before Rocky could get another breath the horse sailed high again, humping its back with a suddenness that seemed to explode the saddle under its rider.

Rocky didn't care. He made no effort to fan his hat or give the shrill *yipwhoop* expected under the circumstances. He was too busy even to think.

He just gripped with his thighs and knees and kept raking the sorrel fore and aft with his glittering spurs. The world pinwheeled around him.

Python crow-hopped, sun-fished, swapped ends, bogged his head, and then tried a throw back. Rocky hung on, and his spurs kept slashing. He raked steel again and again and suddenly it came to him that he was still in the saddle, and all this horse had was a good straight buck with a hump in it and snaky weave.

He wanted to laugh but couldn't utter a sound. He was giggling inside and he thought his spine was coming through the crown of his hat.

He seemed floating in space and he couldn't hear the roaring of the crowd any more. He knew then that Python was bucking straight across country. Rocky began to yell.

He didn't know when the sorrel actually started running, but it was quite a while before he stopped raking his spurs. It took him a mile or more before he got the horse turned around but then he brought it back at a breezing lope.

Big Bart came out on a borrowed horse and picked him off. Other riders caught Python and galloped him off toward the corrals. Big Bart set Rocky down among the Double Dollar crew. He took three steps and fell flat on his face.

When he came to, someone was giving him a drink of water. He looked up and saw it was Cora. He didn't have to say anything. It was all there in her eyes for him to see, and words were unnecessary. She had her arm around his neck.

"Okay," he said. "Let's get away!"

Cora bent close to him. "Rocky, tell me the truth. Are you—really the Canadian Kid?" She was crying—but not much.

"I lied once. Ain't aimin' to again. That was the first bucker I ever rode."

She searched his eyes. "Oh, Rocky!" she cried and fell into his arms.

There was an interruption. Somebody hollered, "One side, you punks!"

Rocky got on his feet in a hurry. He was in time to face Sam and see the determined look. "You liar!" Sam said, and came at Rocky, fists swinging.

Rocky couldn't very well miss because Sam was running those last few feet with his jaw jutting. Rocky hit him hard enough to loosen up his molars and Sam sat down.

Out of the gaping crowd came Gramp Lankerwell, moving with the stringhalt gait of the aged horseman. Gramp was all grins, and he held a bunch of greenbacks in his hand. "Here y'are, horse-tamer! All yours!"

Rocky took the money, wheeled, grabbed Cora and hustled her through the crowd. He faced her a moment later, behind Sam Dugger's barn. First he kissed her and then he said, "Was sorta figurin' I might buy back the old homestead and settle down. Run some cattle maybe, farm it some. Fella ought to do all right with a little of both. You reckon?"

They stood close together, very close. "I reckon," Cora said.

IN THE SADDLE

SOME call him Uncle Sugar—and Uncle Sap. He's loose with laughs —and millions of bucks. He's just saved the hides of thousands of fools with machines, money and men—but that's almost forgotten now. If he don't take a hitch in his britches and let his spurs out to the international town hole, some citizens say, he's plumb hamstrung. The old boy can't figure things out, is all glandered up and don't know where he's heading in. Folks can be wrong as hell. They just forget America's guts—both frontier and present day brand.

In the 1860s, after the Civil War, the United States faced problems similar to today's. Problems relative in degree if not in importance. The nation found that, to maintain its standard of civilization, and advance it, the far corners of the republic must be connected by bands of steel —the railroads. Commercial expansion was necessary. Easier and swifter means of transportation and communication must be provided. The iron horse must bring protection to the few existing isolated American border outposts.

The Central Pacific started laying track from California. The Union Pacific jumped off from Omaha. These were tremendous and dangerous undertakings, gotten under way when the country was in a serious state of flux. Construction of the roads differed mightily from previous projects in that the rights-of-way lay through wilderness. Practically all supplies, excluding wild life killed for human consumption along the ever-lengthening steel trail, must be brought from terminals at the points of origin.

It was tough—a job for only willing, able and courageous men. The supplies must be brought through hostile Indian pickets, and renegade white ambuscades. But, even before that, the necessaries had to be obtained in the face of political and industrial traps set by shysters and unscrupulous businessmen.

From both ends it was a dirty, bone-crushing business hammered through by Irishmen, Chinamen, Spaniards and what-have-you—all Americans doing a thing thousands said just couldn't be done. Of course, the joining of the railroads at Ogden, Utah, in 1869, is known to most everybody. It's an old story but it illustrates that American perseverance and know-how has a curious way of coming through in a pinch.

We figure Uncle Sam don't have to fret much about his ability to get himself out of tights. He did it in the past. He'll do it now. He'll do it in the future.

Yes, there was breath-stopping action in the Old West. Those years are gone, yet they still live in the pages of *Dime Western Magazine*. For instance, if one would step back into history and be a witness to, or engage in, the building of the Union Pacific, he need but turn to Tom W. Blackburn's ringing yarn of early-day railroad building found elsewhere in this issue. It's got guts.

Next month's *Dime Western* spotlighting, in its colorful fiction, the kind of actionful, rugged men who built this country, will be published July 1!

—*The Editor*

★ ★ ★ BLOOD

To halt the deadly combine destroying the brand-new U. P.—could Brice Colman gut-shoot a man he'd gladly give his neck for?

CHAPTER ONE

Blood on the Rails

BRICE COLMAN bent low over the pommel, driving his mount desperately. It was a Cheyenne pony he'd taken from Lone Bear's horse herd and was unaccustomed to carrying a rider as heavy as himself. It stumbled, broke stride, but raced on. Ahead stretched the dun-colored high prairie, unbroken, affording no cover. He had thought Antelope Creek was near; he had gambled on it. But he saw ahead neither the poplars marking the shallow course of the creek nor the smoke made by the hard-working locomotives at end-of-track.

His pursuers fanned out behind, the nearest a half mile distant. Cheyenne warriors, out of Lone Bear's lodge. And they weren't wasting lead in an effort to bring him down. There were Wesson rifles among them and some fair shots; they were, however, content with driving him, knowing he couldn't escape.

His mustang stumbled again. He pulled the animal up and swung down, choosing to be set afoot now rather than risk a bad fall by trying to go on. He lifted his Navy Colt. There were four loads in it. He had no powder, caps, or shot with which to recharge. It was the only weapon he had been able to snatch when he quit the Cheyenne camp.

The pony trotted away and Colman's pursuers spread out into a circling ring, rapidly closing it down to pistol range. This was a hell of a time and place to die. The westward-creeping rails must be near and in the Cheyenne camp he had gained knowledge which might speed up the lay-

ON THE RAILS!

Old West Novelette

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

ing of track. God knew the road needed help. Cheyennes and Sioux were raiding it at will. Political red tape and something more sinister, perhaps, was rendering the few Army units west of the Missouri impotent in clearing the line. Talk was growing that the road would never be completed, that Congress would not appropriate another dime for construction subsidies. Railroad bonds were far below par. It was a bad situation.

Hostile Indians were not the only obstacles. Supplies from the east had slowed to a trickle. It was worth a man's life to travel from Omaha to Julesburg by rail. Trains were being wrecked and burned all along the line. Three successive payrolls had been raided. The paddies and terriers in the construction camps were growing mutinous. With a few weeks more of such trouble, the Union Pacific would be no more than an abandoned dream, rusting to uselessness on the prairie.

He raised the gun and fired its final two charges without haste

The thin circle of Cheyennes about Colman's position were within range. They began to fire. Sand spouted up about him as their lead dropped close. Colman waited. Blue sky arched above him. A cool breeze from the north rippled the grass. The vast, challenging spread of the wilderness lay about him. And death was close. A man's luck was a strange thing. Brice had been a brevet-colonel of cavalry at twenty-three. He had survived the war without casualty. And all of the time the death which had passed him by at The Run and Gettysburg and Antietam had been waiting for him here.

A bolder Cheyenne in the circle veered in close. Colman lifted his gun and his hand tightened. The weapon fired. The Cheyenne spilled. Colman coolly picked another target and emptied a second pony's back. There were eight of them left, closing in steadily.

KNEELING, he waited. Suddenly, one of the Cheyennes shouted, gesturing toward the south. A puff of dust was apparent there above a coulee. The Indians bunched for a brief, shouted parley, then turned and rode as one man directly toward Colman. At the last moment he raised the gun and fired its final two charges without haste, spilling two more warriors. The others veered and as he swung his gun toward them as though it was still charged, they dropped to the far side of their horses and frantically retreated.

Riders had appeared under the puff of dust to the south. They came streaming across the grass, perhaps ten of them, riding much like the Cheyennes. Little men, nondescriptly attired in cast-off white men's clothing, but riding Army issue saddles. Skidi Pawnees, Army scouts, mortal enemies of the retreating Cheyennes.

Three other riders trailed in the dust of the scouts. As the Pawnees streamed on past in pursuit of the retreating Cheyennes, the first of these veered over to Colman.

"All right, boy?"

Colman stood up, thrust the pistol into his belt and dusted his knees.

"All right, Len," he said. "You picked a good time to show up."

Len Kish, captain of the Pawnee scouts, chuckled. "And you, boy, you sort of cut a corner pretty close when you go around it. I didn't pull your bacon out of this fire a-purpose. I came out this way with a couple of people who wanted to see the real open country. Important people. A man and his niece—from New York, I think. Brought them out here on orders, but I don't like it. Not with the Cheyenne and Brule raiding right up to our picket lines. Now I got an excuse to turn back. End-of-track's about fifteen miles east."

Brice grunted. "Fifteen miles!" he said. "Then it's a good thing you did show up, Len. I thought I was headed right for Antelope Creek and the rails. Must have angled too far west."

"You were angled all right, Brice," Len growled. "Trouble is, the rails ain't to Antelope yet."

"More trouble? They should have made it easy in the ten days I've been gone."

"More trouble. Three trains wrecked and burned last week. No ties in the camp; no back pay for the men. Not even too much food. Frank Orth's in the camp. He'll give you the details, Brice."

Kish stepped back. The two remaining members of his party had come up. He nodded to them. One was a smiling, square-faced man who seemed vaguely familiar to Colman. The other was a girl in a blue riding habit with a long plume in her hat. A beautiful girl, disconcerting to find so far out here on the grass.

"Folks," Len Kish said, "this is Brice Colman, boss of all advance work on the road and one of the few men to have seen every inch of survey the rails will cover, clear to the Pacific. Brice, this is Mr. Ned Valcour and his niece, Miss Janet—"

Ned Valcour was handling a big, spirited bay easily, powerful hands tight on the reins. "We met before, Colman—in Washington. Remember?"

Brice nodded. He remembered now. This was a man reputed to be fabulously wealthy. Colman's boss, the tired, harassed occupant of the White House in Washington, had hoped to interest him and his money in the building of the rails. Suddenly recalled to the plains of the

Platte, Brice had never discovered what had come of Valcour's visit to Washington.

He turned toward the man's niece. He remembered her, also—from a party in a Washington mansion the one night he had been in formal dress. A girl who had provided the only bright spot in his visit to the east and whom he had almost forgotten before the press of work which had faced him when he re-crossed the Missouri. From the sudden rush of color to her face and the reserved nod of acknowledgment when he belatedly recalled his manners and bowed, Janet Valcour also remembered him.

"If you'll catch up one of those loose Cheyenne ponies for me, Len," he told the captain of the Pawnee scouts, "I think we'd better all head back to end-of-track. There's danger for us all here and a lot of work for me to do when we get to the rails."

A BELL-stacked locomotive *chuffed* busily, nudging forward a string of flatcars loaded with oak ties. There was dust and noise, clanging thunder which stirred Colman's blood. Sledges on steel, the rocking rhythm of chanting paddies, the scream of whistles, the rumble of wheels on new-laid track. An inexorable forward movement which defied malice and politics and grafting and personal greed. Colman thought again as he had before that if timorous fools in the east could see this sight there would be no more talk about the impossibility of completing the road.

If they could see wagon trains following the rails and pushing on they'd know this movement toward the setting sun was irresistible. There was an empty world out here waiting to be filled. There were potentialities dwarfing current standards of measurement. And there was western wealth to rebuild a war-gutted country fast, once there was an endless string of steel to the Pacific. This was the march of a restless people, and fighting their enemies was Brice Colman's job.

He pulled up beside the tie-cars at end-of-track and spoke to the others. "I leave you here. It was pleasant to have seen you again, Mr. Valcour—Miss Janet—"

Valcour was cordial. "The pleasure was ours. Eh, Janet? How about dinner with us tonight, Colman?"

"I'd like that," Brice said. "However, I won't be in camp. I've got to get on back to Julesburg tonight."

"Perfect!" Valcour said. "My private car was due to be returned a little later in the evening. I'll ask for an engine immediately. We can dine as we ride. We'll wait for you."

Janet Valcour said nothing. She had been silent on the ride into camp. Her eyes had been busy with the country, with the line of the railroad survey, with construction itself. Colman had wanted a word with her, an explanation of why he hadn't followed up the pleasant evening of dancing with her in Washington, but he had been unable to manage it. When he saw a faint echo of her uncle's invitation in the girl's eyes, he nodded acceptance and reined away.

A few moments later Bruce Colman swung down before the Sibley tent Frank Orth used when he was at end-of-track. He stepped inside. Orth, working at a traveling-desk, came to his feet with an exclamation of surprise. He was a small, round-faced man, quiet and self-effacing, but there was razor steel behind the mildness of his manner. He was the railroad's chief of detectives.

"Brice, where you been?" he demanded. "I've been worried! You and Jack Ivers—"

"You've seen Jack?" Colman interrupted.

"Not for more than a week. With that much time gone, I figured I'd lost another good man."

"Maybe you have, Frank," Brice said. "I don't know. I wish I did. I wish to God I did!"

"Sit down," Orth urged. "Tell me about it."

"Jack and I rode out of Julesburg one night more than a week back with a man who had part of his right ear missing. Know him, Frank?"

"No. Afraid I don't."

"I want that man. That's the first order of business for you and your boys. He contacted Jack Ivers in Julesburg, claimed to be part of the wrecker gang and ready to sell out. He offered to take us to the wreckers' headquarters. We

started out and were jumped just after dawn by a bunch of Cheyennes. It was quick and smooth. The gotch-eared son batted a gun against my head and I came to in Lone Bear's lodge. That stone-faced Indian claimed to have picked me up asleep on the grass—a flat lie. I didn't see Jack again. The squaws worked on a white man that night. I heard them."

Orth frowned. "That sort of thing makes hard listening. You think it might have been Jack?"

"I was sure of it, at first. Now I don't know . . . Why would they kill him and leave me? I was treated pretty well. They gave me enough slack so I was finally able to grab a gun and a pony. They damned near got me again, but Len Kish and his Pawnees showed up in time to save my hair a couple of hours ago."

Orth picked up a cigar and chewed it reflectively. "Kind of funny, ain't it, Brice? I can understand them wanting to get rid of Brice Colman, but why didn't they go ahead when they had the chance? And separating you and Ivers—him disappearing—" Orth spat, his eyes narrowing. "I gave Ivers a job in my outfit on your recommendation, Brice," he went on. "You told me he was your best friend. Then you borrowed him back from me. You take your orders direct from the White House. I know that. You've probably got more power than any other one man on the road, clear to the top, if you want to use it. A detective uncovers some funny things when he goes to work. I want to know where I stand with you."

"You suspect Ivers?"

"I suspect everybody, Brice," Orth said. "If I happened to nail something onto Ivers, I wouldn't want you to tie up my hands."

Colman understood. There was a murderous undercover war going on. Orth had lost many good men. The rest of his boys liked to avenge their own dead.

"Jack's in the clear, if he's alive," he said, with a certainty he didn't feel. "He can defend himself. The gotch-eared man is the one I'm interested in."

"You don't give me much to go on, Brice, but I'll alert my boys. We'll grab him for you."

"I think he might still be in Julesburg. I'm going back there tonight to see. Ned Valcour's in camp, as you probably know. I'm going back with him in his car."

ORTH whistled, narrowing his eyes. "You sure ride tall horses, Brice! And you're a good talker. Maybe you can sell Valcour the Union Pacific. Somebody better had. The road needs money bad, and nobody with any has shown the interest he has."

"Things don't get any better, then?"

"Hardly!" Orth said. "We're laying steel because a string of tie-cars managed to inch through last night. Cost us the locomotive we ran ahead. Some boulders piled on the line at Poplar Creek. Those wreckers again! Tomorrow the paddies will be idle once more."

"What's the latest quotation on U.P. bonds?" Brice asked thoughtfully.

"Eh? Why do you ask that?"

"A hunch. The quotations still falling?"

"Yes," Orth admitted. "With reason enough, too! We're paying four dollars apiece for ties. Cordwood's above a hundred dollars, and hay's twenty-eight dollars a ton. The road's scraping the bottom of its cashbox again. Congress is screaming about costs. Every contractor that's taken a risk on the line has gone broke. If we could get some cash to carry us until we've wiped out the killers who're hamstringing us—so we can bring up some trains and get some track laid—then maybe your boss, President Johnson, could get Congress to change its mind. Do what you can with Valcour, Brice, and leave that gotch-eared son in Julesburg to me and my boys."

Colman nodded and returned to his horse, leading the animal across to his own shelter. He had not missed the asperity of Orth's claim on the gotch-eared man who might be in Julesburg. He understood. Apprehension of men wanted by the road was Orth's department and the detective would resent interference with quick professional pride. But Colman's own orders from Washington had been simple: keep the road building at all costs. And there was a personal matter involved. A man had been sliced to death in Lone Bear's camp, his protracted death agony audible across the

width of the village. It could have been Jack Ivers. And Ivers had been Brice's friend.

If it had been Ivers who had died in the Cheyenne camp, this was something for which the gotch-eared man who had led them there would have to answer to Brice Colman ahead of everyone else.

CHAPTER TWO

Man With a Half Ear

SHAVED, bathed and passably attired, Colman swung along the shining strip of fresh-laid track. The Valcour car was on a siding with several empties coupled ahead of it to insure a fairly smooth ride over the new track. It was obviously a product of Mr. Pullman's shop in Chicago, with lavish use of red plush, gilt and silk tassels. A car bearing U.P. markings.

A small dark man in a white coat opened the door for him and Colman grunted in surprise, recognizing one of Frank Orth's operatives. Janet Valcour, attired now in a dress of blue velvet, with a full skirt and bustle, her shoulders bare and her dark hair upswept, came forward with a strained smile of welcome.

"My uncle will join us in a moment, Mr. Colman," she said. "Could I order you a drink before dinner?"

Colman retained her hand and shook his head with a smile.

"You can offer me more than that, Miss Valcour," he told her. "Understanding of something I've never had a chance to explain. Acceptance of the fact a man isn't always his own master. I was ordered west the very night we met in Washington. There was no time, no opportunity to let you know, to thank you for the pleasant memory you let me bring out here with me."

The girl's eyes didn't waver. "You could have written."

"No. In my work I can't put anything on paper. The risk is too great."

The girl's eyes turned toward a window beyond which were the lanterns and torchlight of the still-surging end-of-track camp.

"In Washington I couldn't have understood, Brice," she said. "Out here, since I've seen all this and felt it, perhaps I do."

There was a slight jar as an engine was coupled to the cars ahead. The lights of the camp began to slide past the windows. The girl dropped onto a plush settee with an invitation to Colman to join her. Ned Valcour came in, freshly barbered, pink-faced and smiling genially, before he could accept.

"Hello, Colman," he said. "This is a rare pleasure—an evening in the company of the mystery man of the railroad. I talk best at the table. They seem ready to serve. Janet, if you'll lead the way. . . ."

* * *

Under other circumstances Colman would have enjoyed the meal. The coach rocked somewhat on the still uneven roadbed, but not unpleasantly. Orth's man had unobtrusively drawn the curtains so that for a moment there was an illusion of a leisurely dinner—food such as Colman hadn't tasted in a long while—in the home of a cultured gentleman, with a beautiful woman across the cloth for company.

But the illusion was not complete. For all his blandness, an air of powerful ruthlessness clung to Ned Valcour. Big-bodied, massive, with surety of movement in his hands, Brice was constantly reminded that Valcour had amassed a fortune at a time in the history of the country when most great fortunes were being destroyed rather than made. And he thought of the plea Orth had asked him to make to this man. He doubted Valcour could be easily swayed by sentiment, by an appeal to emotions, by the intangibles which made the people building this road believe they were engaged in one of the greatest works of man.

Nevertheless, after brandy and cigars, he reluctantly shifted his attention from Janet to Valcour and began to talk of the road and its meaning.

"California and Oregon must have the same importance and meaning as Pennsylvania and New York, Mr. Valcour," he said. "These rails are the only way that can be achieved. Without them, we run grave risk of losing half of our country. It's more than a business venture;

it's an investment in the nation, itself."

"You're persuasive, Colman." Valcour smiled. He looked at his watch, tapping its crystal thoughtfully. "Isn't there a stop somewhere along here?"

"Yes, at Twin Buttes. Only a moment, for clearance. We'll still be in Julesburg before midnight."

Valcour put his watch away.

"Rumor runs ahead of a man like myself," he said. "I know my purpose in being here is generally understood. The railroad is frantically trying to turn up private capital. Your people have been at me for months. Frankly, I haven't liked the situation I've found out here. I've never been a man to invest in lost hopes."

THE girl opposite Brice caught her breath in disagreement. She had for some time been sitting forward on the edge of her chair, listening intently. Colman realized he had won at least one convert for his road, even if she was powerless to help it. Valcour glanced at her, frowned slightly and brought his attention back to Colman, the lids of his eyes now slightly lowered.

"There's only one thing about these rails that interests me," he went on. "Whoever controls them will control that half of the nation you're afraid we might lose, Colman. And control will have to be in a strong man who knows his power and how to use it or the rails themselves will be worse than useless. The only trouble is, half a railroad can't interest that kind of man and this road will never be finished—not under the present management. I won't underwrite failure!"

It was Colman's turn to frown.

Valcour smiled thinly at him. "I've thought about you occasionally since our meeting in Washington," the financier went on. "I've about concluded you're an unusual man in this world, Colman—a man more interested in ideas than in money. It's too bad that's so. If it wasn't, we might be able to do some business together. Ah, we're slowing. This must be the Twin Buttes stop. Excuse me a moment while I get a message onto the wires here? A man's business seems to follow him wherever he goes."

"I'll step off with you," Colman volunteered. "It's not wise for a man to be alone along the roadbed here."

"No need," Valcour told him, smiling. "I'm armed."

Colman frowned at the weapon he saw in the vest holster. It was an over-and-under .44, not the best weapon in the world in his estimation, although perhaps deadly enough for close work. Valcour went out through the front of the car.

Janet rose and put one hand earnestly on Colman's arm. "I'm sorry for Uncle Ned's viewpoint. I don't share it, at all. I wish his decision wasn't such a disappointment to you."

Colman smiled at her. "With your company, nothing could spoil this evening."

He liked the way color came up in her cheeks. He took her hand and led her to the rear door. There was a platform at the back of the car with a railing around it. He lighted the cigar he had accepted at the table. The engine was panting impatiently up ahead. He heard voices in low talk somewhere in the darkness. The girl was silent beside him. She seemed to understand, as few strangers did, that silence was a human virtue in this country.

Someone came along the car's far side, walking lightly along the thin ballast of the roadbed. Colman heard a trainman call, up ahead, and the car jerked, beginning its forward motion once more. He supposed Valcour had climbed back on at the forward coupling, where he had swung down. He moved closer to the girl, touching his Colt, a sense of danger impending thrusting at him. As he moved a man came suddenly up over the railing in a swift rush. A gun spat at close range, thunderously. Colman lurched against the girl, knocked her to the platform, and fell half across her, sheltering her as best he could.

Twisting to free his weapon, then, he saw silhouetted in the faint moonlight the figure of a hatless man. On one side was the ragged outline of a huge ear, the upper half of which was missing.

THE rear door of the car swung wide and Orth's white-coated operative leaped out onto the platform. He hit the gotch-eared man, hands clutching for his

throat. Colman came up. The scent of burned cloth was in his nostrils but he did not seem to have been hit by the shot fired almost in his face. He took a step forward, lifting his Colt. This was one man he wanted alive.

Orth's man suddenly grunted with pain and staggered back, clutching at a great knife wound. The man with half an ear shifted toward Colman, gun in his right hand, an opened spring-blade knife low in his left. Brice was forced to fire hurriedly to keep the man away from him. The fellow slammed back against the railing under the impact of the Colt slug, tilted and spilled over to the roadbed, vanishing in the backward racing night. Colman leaned over the rail also, fighting back an impulse to drop to the roadbed and quit the train—to make certain of the man who had betrayed him to Lone Bear. He was unhurt, though a bullet had clipped shoulder padding in his coat. He turned back to Janet Valcour as she regained her feet. She was staring with compressed lips at Orth's operative.

Valcour's big bulk appeared in the car doorway. He was shouting angrily.

"Shut up!" Colman snapped at him. "See Miss Janet to her stateroom, then give me a hand with this man. He's badly hurt!"

Valcour vanished with the girl. Colman knelt by Orth's man. The detective's eyes fluttered.

"Made a mistake, Mr. Colman," he whispered. "Should have pinned his arms. Tell Orth I did my best—"

Brice growled angrily. He stepped into the doorway, meeting the frowning Valcour there.

"Too late," he said. "The man out here is dead. We'll bring him inside and cover him up till we reach Julesburg."

"I thought this talk of violence along the road might be exaggerated, Colman," Valcour said, eyes glittering angrily. "Hell, reports cover only half the truth! A road that can't keep order along the rails it has already put down shouldn't be permitted to lay any more. I'll give my report to every newspaper in the east when I get back to Washington. And I won't leave Julesburg until you've arranged armed protection for me clear to Omaha. . . ."

This was the town which never slept. Torches flared in the night, lighting the fronts of saloons. Stores were open and jammed. Freight wagons crowded the streets, beds pinned to axles by the weight of supplies destined for end-of-track. A long wagon train was wearily trying to force a way through the tangle—tilts over twisted bows, gaunt oxen, big and determined men with purpose in their forward-leaning bodies. A party bound for Brigham Young's new colony on Great Salt Lake.

A hymn lifted from this caravan fighting its way by night toward open country. It mingled in a strange sort of harmony with the tinny music from the honkytonks, contributing its bit to the surging vitality flung upward at the stars above Julesburg.

There was a milling, restless crowd about the station, where idle rolling stock packed sidings as far as the eye could reach. A crowd feverishly seeking news, snatching at items of gossip and magnifying them in shouted waves of talk. The idlers crowded about the Valcour car, peering through the windows and speculating as to the identity of the still figure under the blanket on the divan.

Colman's earlier surmise that Ned Valcour would have no further word for him was correct. The man had not again come out of his stateroom. Janet, however, had finished the ride on into Julesburg beside Colman. She extended her hand as he opened the car door. "I'm sorry it couldn't have been a happier evening than this, Brice," she said sincerely.

"So am I," he told her. "But don't worry about it and don't worry about the road. Come west again next year and you'll be able to ride on steel to California. I promise you."

"I'll hold you to that, Brice," she agreed.

Swinging down from the rear platform, Colman smashed a way through the crowd. He had little use for end-of-track towns, although he supposed they were a necessary evil. He had less use for the riff-raff crowding them, the kind of opportunists now trying to determine if rumors of the road's failure were true and if the time had come for them to abandon it. The road's big portable ware-

house was being dismantled here, he saw, the crews being driven through the night by bull-voiced Irish foremen—a reflection of hard optimism that the warehouse would be reassembled farther along the line.

STRANGELY, this sight buoyed Colman's own resolution. There was deep weariness in him but this was no time to seek his own quarters. He stepped between a pair of wagons in the emigrant train, up out of the ankle-deep dust to a wooden walk, and elbowed through the crowd there to the door of the Julesburg House. Working his way along the bar here, where drinkers stood three deep, he came to the end and found elbow space.

He watched the frantically working dozen bartenders back of the mahogany. A small, bald apron-man came when he beckoned.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Name it but don't make it fancy."

"I want information," Colman said. "Bring me a shot of rye and think about my question while you're doing it."

"The hell! I haven't got time—"

Colman displayed a twenty-dollar bill. "Find time!" he suggested.

The barman looked hastily around and swabbed the counter toward Colman. He took the bill. "Shoot, mister!"

"You know me—who I am. I've been here with a yellow-haired, good-looking bucko near my height. Last time the two of us were here, we were with a short, wide man with a gotch ear. I want to know if you've seen that man in here with anybody else, and recently. Give me a description I can use and there'll be another bill to match the one you've got."

The bartender frowned and moved away. Colman waited impatiently. He was shoved against the bar by men crowding up behind him to shout for service. He braced himself and shoved back, trying to keep enough room about him so that he could hold whatever answer the bartender brought back confidential. The apron returned. He set a glass down in front of Colman. He spoke swiftly and low.

"I remember, sure. He's been here lots lately. Sometimes with a little man, mole on his left cheek, sort of round-faced, with a streak of white in his part—"

"Damn it, you don't understand!" Colman snapped, recognizing this description as fitting only Frank Orth. "It's gotch-ear I wanted to know if you've seen."

"I'm trying to tell you!" the barkeep muttered.

Somebody crowded Colman hard from behind. His work had cultivated an instinctive prescience of impending danger which now suddenly clamored warning. He twisted. As he did so, the explosive roar of a shot slammed past him. The bartender's smooth face tightened in vast astonishment as the bullet intended for Colman tore into his own body. There was an immediate uproar. Colman was crowded and jostled by a crowd of apparently angry men, any of whom could have fired the shot which had so narrowly missed him.

"He gunned Baldy for no cause!" a man shouted, clawing toward him. "Grab the son!"

The saloon echoed pandemonium as the crowd closed in. Colman swung his body violently one way and then the other, gaining room to lift his arms. He skidded a fist off of a stubbly cheek and felt teeth give in another man's mouth under the impact of a second blow. He broke his Colt clear.

At a little distance, he saw a familiar face, one he had not expected to see here.

"This way, Brice!" Len Kish called. "The back way. We'll go together."

COLMAN nodded, slamming a man aside to join Kish. Their two guns held off the crowd. They worked under a balcony overhang, along a corridor of curtained booths and through a door into the dark alley behind the place. They walked rapidly along this. The confused racket behind them died slowly.

"That was fast and slick, Brice," Kish said. "That bullet was meant for you. Couldn't see who fired it. Broke too sudden. And it was sure covered quick."

"What are you doing here, Len?" Colman asked sharply.

"Rode in on one of the empties hooked ahead of Valcour's car. Came in for a drink and bought trouble, instead. Got a talent for that, I guess. Makes no never mind to me. One's as good as the

other to keep a man on his toes."

"Anybody else ride those empties?"

"Didn't see anybody. I slept most of the way in. Look, Brice, this has got to be wound up and I want a piece of it. Somebody took two shots at me while I was in camp, just after sunset. This is the second try for me at end-of-track. I figure waiting for a third will be running my luck too damned thin. How the hell you suppose they spotted me and want to punch my ticket? You knew I was working for Orth because you got me that job of bossing the Skidi Pawnees through the Army. Orth knew it. But nobody else did."

Colman grunted. Someone else had known Kish was an undercover observer. A man who had read it over Colman's shoulder one evening when he was drafting a secret report. Jack Ivers.

Swinging down a side lane, Brice pulled up again at the edge of the main street of Julesburg.

"All right, Len," he said. "I've got a chore for you. You know this town. You've got good contacts here. I want you to find Jack Ivers!"

Kish blinked. "Ivers? Brice, listen—I thought you knew. My Pawnees caught a couple of those Cheyennes that were hounding you this afternoon. One of them wanted to boast. Lone Bear did turn a white man over to his squaws a few nights ago."

"The Cheyenne mention the color of the white man's hair?"

Kish shook his head grimly. "My Skidis don't let a Cheyenne live long enough to do much talking."

"Comb the town, then! I've got to know if Ivers is here and why he hasn't contacted me, if he is around. If you find anything, I'll be somewhere near the station."

"After that try back there, if you head up this street alone you may never reach the station alive!" Kish growled.

"Maybe," Colman agreed. "But I've got to have the answers to some questions, Len. Why I'm suddenly marked for death. Who marked me. Why I was tolled out to Lone Bear's camp and held there, unarmed. If Jack's still alive, I've got a notion he can tell me. Get moving, Len. We don't have all night."

CHAPTER THREE

He Won't See Dawn!

IN SPITE of Len Kish's prediction, no one in the surging street crowd attempted to stop Colman. A sheaf of messages was on file for him with the telegraph operator at the Julesburg station. He shuffled through them rapidly. Among them were daily reports on U.P. bond quotations, wired from New York City. He saw there had been a steady downward drift during his absence. He nodded thoughtfully. The key to the whole thing was here, he was sure, but he didn't know how to use it.

Leaning wearily against the counter, he tried to focus his thoughts on this problem, but they persisted in swinging toward Jack Ivers. It was a hell of a thing to suspect treachery of a friend—of a man who had ridden through the long years of the war beside him. But a man had a job and he did it. Frank Orth had the right idea; he had to suspect everybody.

He looked again at the bond quotations and saw a peculiar pattern in them. Although the general trend had been downward, there were brief rallies, obviously caused by spurts of buying. This was curious. No investor under present circumstances should be interested in the bonds of a supposedly doomed venture. He called across the counter to the operator.

"Let me see your outgoing eastern file for today," he ordered.

A board of scrawled forms was passed across to him. He riffled through them. Railroad business, some personal messages; nothing of interest to him. He shook his head.

"This all the line's handled?" he demanded sharply. "You clear everything from on west of here, don't you?"

"Didn't know you meant that," the operator said. "Wasn't much—just one message from Twin Buttes, tonight."

He passed across another board, to which one form was clipped. The message was addressed to E. Valcour, Ltd., New York City:

BUY UP TO ONE MILLION UPRR BONDS AT MARKET TOMORROW MORNING

Colman passed the clipboard back and stepped outside again. The wind-swept station platform was thick with midnight darkness and it was empty. A hundred yards distant, the private car which had brought Ned Valcour and his niece to end-of-track stood on the main line, one of the company's new Rogers locomotives coupled to it and impatiently panting steam into the darkness.

Colman's lips tightened. This was what he had been searching for. Something tangible. Something to which he could try to fit his key. The glow of lamplight was warm in the interior of the car. Colman swung up to the rear platform. Valcour sat on the plush divan inside, a small portable desk on his knees. He was working on a stack of papers. Colman stepped quietly through the door. Valcour's head came up. He frowned. Colman saw the challenge in his eyes. This was a man to be handled directly. There was no other way.

"Waiting for a piece of business to be cleaned up here in Julesburg before you order your train on east, Valcour? Sorry to bring you bad news, but for the second time tonight your men missed me. I'm still on my feet."

"So I see," Valcour said. "I've always been fussy about the men I hire, but a certain number of fumblers seem to weasel their way into any enterprise. That's the reason why I'd have given a great deal to have a man like you—a man who doesn't make that kind of mistakes—working for me."

"You hinted at that at dinner," Colman said. "I think I understand, now. I think I know why Lone Bear held me in his camp instead of lifting my hair. He had orders. You were on your way out to end-of-track to personally give me a choice between the carving of Cheyenne squaws and a place on your payroll."

"Essentially, yes," Valcour agreed. "Ever since our chance meeting in Washington, I've wanted the personal representative of the president out here to be working on my side."

"That accounts for my invitation to dinner?"

"Exactly. It was a disappointment, Colman. In ten minutes with you tonight at the table I knew your idealism couldn't be bought. I had to give an order for your death when you could have been my right-hand man in running the U.P. some day. You won't be on your feet too long, Colman. Not all of my men are bunglers. Particularly the one I have in the company's detective force."

COLMAN spoke slowly. "That's how it was to work, then. You are after control of the road. To get it, you've been stalling construction every way you could, in order to drive bond prices down so that you could buy them cheaply and in small lots."

Valcour smiled. "Finance is more complicated than that, Colman. Slowing the laying of the rails is only a part of it. I've had agents in Washington working to keep more money from being appropriated by Congress. Newspapers all over the country have been unknowingly running articles I've planted with them, attacking the reputation of the U.P. I've brought pressure to bear on certain suppliers, slowing orders down. I've even had a man at President Johnson's ear, undermining any work you might do out here.

"Now the pattern is complete. By the time I reach New York I'll have the control I want. There'll be an election and a new board of directors. After that, a word from me and trains will run to end-of-track unmolested. Rail-laying will hit new peaks. The line will join the Central Pacific on schedule. And when the last spike is driven, all the rails from Omaha to Utah will belong to me."

"Except that no man's plans are ever perfect, Valcour," Colman said quietly. "I'm still on my feet and so is Len Kish, in town."

"Kish is too stubborn, like you, Colman. I've tried twice for him; the third time I can't miss. He won't see dawn. And although it pains me in a way and may pain my niece even more, neither will you!"

"A man learns to give up bluffing out here, Valcour. It's time you did, too. I looked things over before I came in here. You haven't got a man posted outside."

Valcour's smile broadened. "Too bad you didn't have an opportunity to do any looking inside."

There were footfalls in the car's forward passageway. A man stepped into the salon but remained in shadow. Rigid anger gripped Brice Colman. It was directed at the complacently smiling man before him, but not wholly because of Valcour's smooth planning. The wreckage of half a dozen years of friendship with a laughing, careless, yellow-haired daredevil was on the scales now. He was certain it was Jack Ivers who stood just beyond the range of lamplight.

Suddenly as the rigidity had come, it was gone. Colman scowled with a wave of sickened bitterness. "I didn't think of this, Valcour," he said. "I should have. When you buy treachery, you bid for the best. Jack wouldn't have suited you. Hell, no! He was only a subordinate and he hated taking orders. He just got in the way of your plans—like that poor devil who was stabbed at Twin Buttes tonight. Your money bought you a bigger man, one who was really in a position to work with your wrecking gang. No wonder your killer in the Julesburg House tonight tried to finish me fast! That bartender wasn't talking about Jack Ivers. He was trying to tell me about another man who had talked to your gotch-eared murderer while I was a prisoner in Lone Bear's village."

He spoke to the man in the shadows with a heavy weariness. "Come on out, Frank. It looks like all the cards are going down. I'd like to know what Valcour's market price for a man like you might be."

There was movement. Frank Orth stepped into the light, gun in hand. "It was enough," the chief of detectives answered. "Be careful, Brice. I know how fast you draw. I'm not taking any chances with you."

"You shouldn't!" Colman said harshly. "Not after the way you let Jack die in the Cheyenne camp. He was my friend, Frank."

Valcour stirred, blowing a puff of smoke. "We're wasting time," he said. "Orth, you pulled a fool play at Twin Buttes. You endangered my niece by sending your one-eared killer at Colman. You've got to handle this fellow now with no mistakes—and he's got a gift for staying on his feet."

Orth nodded, tight-lipped. "It was a slip, all right. But I couldn't make the try myself, at Twin Buttes; the girl would have recognized me. I had to stay in that empty car and send my boy to do it. And then the fool the road made me plant here, for your protection, got in the way and messed things up. It'll be handled properly, this time, well away from the tracks. I'll be sure he can never get up again. Turn around, Brice."

Colman looked at the gun-muzzle, centered squarely on him. A man lived a lifetime to face a moment like this—a win-or-lose toss of the dice. He shifted his feet as he turned. Half way around, with the left side of his body toward Orth, he drew.

THERE was gun-thunder in the coach. Spitting flame and the taste of acrid smoke. Colman's gun cleared. He fired it once. Orth came toward him an uncertain step and spilled slowly forward onto his face. Glass fell from a window at the rear of the car, shattered by one of Orth's shots. Shouts sounded outside; men ran along the roadbed toward the car. Someone cried out nearer at hand. Janet Valcour rushed from the stateroom passageway of the car, hastily belting a robe about her slender figure. She sidestepped Orth's body, apparently without seeing it, her eyes widening with shock as they fastened on Colman.

Valcour had lost his cigar but his hand remained frozen in mid-air as though still clutching it. Colman swung toward him. There was numbed hurt somewhere high in his body, forerunner of pain and unsteadiness to come. Orth's first shot had been close to its center mark.

"Drop that gun!" Valcour said with hurried desperation. His words ran together in Colman's ringing ears, so that they made little sense. "Drop it. Don't forget I'm an honored guest of the road and anything I say will be believed at headquarters. You can't make any talk that you can back with proof. Drop that gun!"

Colman swayed, his weapon sagging. Valcour's hand darted downward for his own vest gun, the over-and-under .44. It came up with startling speed. A weapon

(Please turn to page 98)

WINNER TAKE ALL

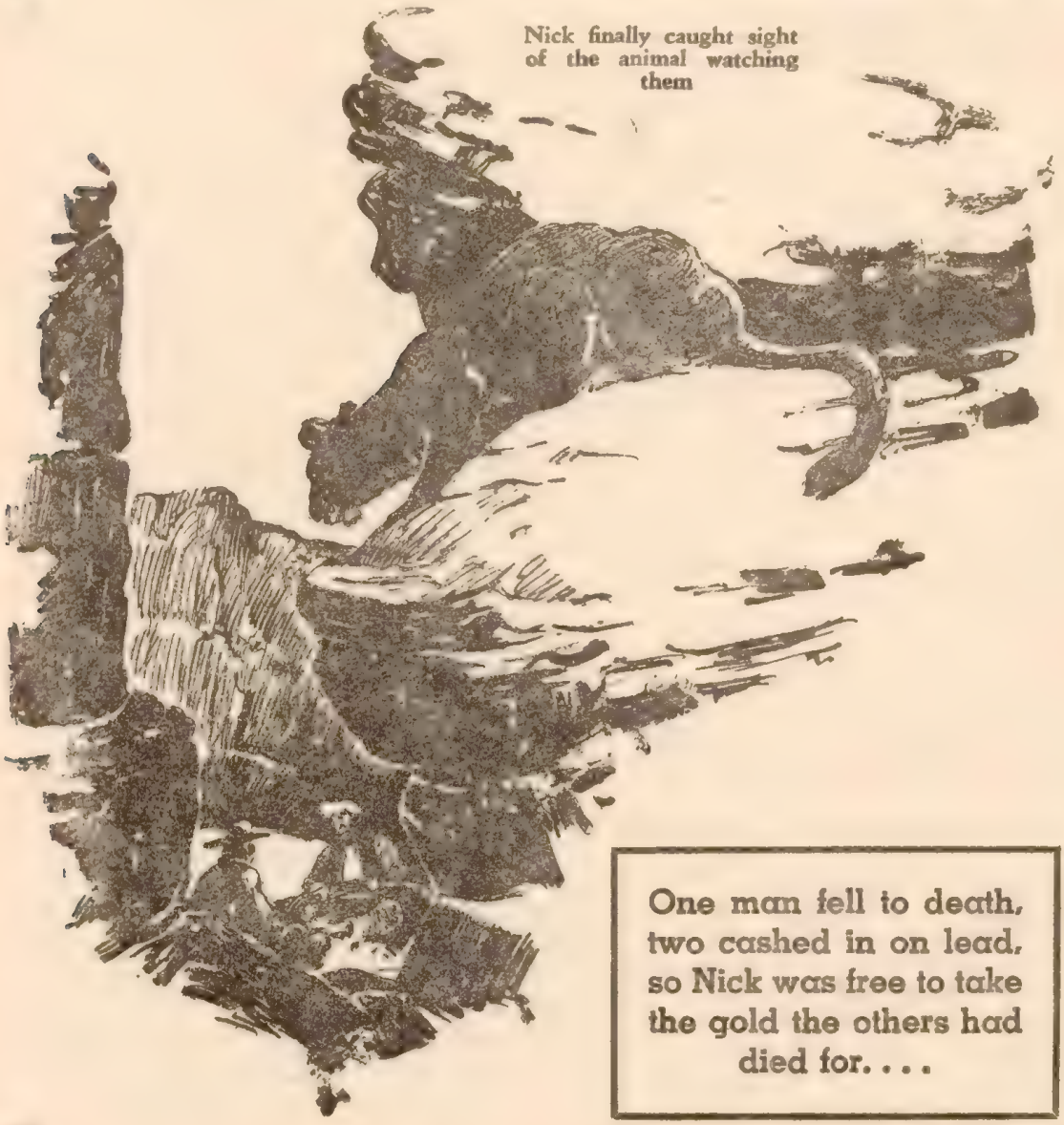
By MARVIN DE VRIES

NICK PURDY led the way up the trail into the Lavender Mountains, and his thoughts drifted back over the long trail he and his three pardners had ridden. A trail ten years long, and this was the last lap, this long, narrow-gauge climb out of hell, into what promised to be another hell—this time of their own making.

They were friends no more, even if they kept up the pretense, and they would part in gunsmoke.

I won't start it, Purdy told himself, but if it starts I guess I can hold my own.

Then he frowned, thinking of Al Grace, who rode closest behind him. Al had the edge with a gun, and he had some brains when he chose to use them. Besides, he



Nick finally caught sight of the animal watching them

One man fell to death, two cashed in on lead, so Nick was free to take the gold the others had died for. . . .

was cold-blooded as a snake. The other two, Show Me and Galt Yamp, were schemers, but didn't have the brains to work things right.

The trouble was that the cache for which they were heading was too small. It amounted to twenty thousand dollars, cash and currency, which was all they had to show for their ten years on the outlaw trail. It was a nice sum for one man but when split four ways it wasn't so hot. Purdy knew each would make a play to get the whole amount. I'll take my split an' I won't gripe, Nick vowed. But the minute I see anybody making a move to hog it all, I'll do some hoggin' myself.

Nick had picked a grassy pocket at the end of the trail for the cache. It was safe but tough to get to. Show Me, last in line, was first to come to grief. The tuckered horse he rode came to a halt on a small ledge of rimrock and refused to go on.

"Damn his skin!" Show Me muttered. "He knows I can't stand to look down more'n ten feet, an' he's got to pick a place to breathe where I can't see nothin' but air all around."

"If you'd gotten your fat fanny off'n him an hour ago you wouldn't be in trouble now," Purdy stated. "You knew he'd play out. He always does."

"I'm freezin'," Show Me stated, his eyes beginning to bulge, "I'm freezin' tight. That cliff goes down a half mile." He slid off the horse and put his back to the sheer wall, bracing his stumpy legs ahead of him so that, wherever he went, he wouldn't go over the edge. "I don't know why you'd have to pick a place like this to make a cache. What'll I do?"

"You better get that horse to movin'."

"I can't do it, Nick," Show Me muttered. "I'll go overboard, sure as hell."

Nick eyed him suspiciously. This is the start, he thought. This is Show Me's play. Cut him open from head to foot and you wouldn't find a nerve in his whole fat carcass. He'd been up here before and it hadn't bothered him. Show Me knew his horse would balk, and this was his way of building up his percentage of the cache. It was a trap, and Galt Yamp stepped into it. "You and Al go ahead, Nick," he said. "I'll help you."

Purdy and Grace rode on. The trail twisted sharply, clinging to the solid wall on one side and dropping a thousand feet on the other. Ahead, at another turn, it looked like it ran off into thin air. Nick's spine tingled and sweat popped out on his forehead, but it wasn't because of the view. It was because Al Grace rode behind him and had the whip hand. If he wanted to, he could put a bullet into Nick's back and send him plunging down the drop.

But Grace didn't make his play, and Nick could see the reason. It was too risky to try, here on this narrow trail. If he fired and spooked either horse he might follow Nick over the edge. Besides, no one could be sure how Show Me and Galt Yamp made out. Both might be acting in good faith, and if they were Al Grace still would have them to face and Yamp at least was handy with a gun.

THEY reached the top, and the trail flattened out into a grassy meadow hemmed on three sides by high walls and tumbled rocks. A small stream ran into it from the far side. It was pretty as a picture, a good place for anyone to hole up as long as the graze lasted. They had all been up here before, and knew the layout.

The cache was back in a narrow split in the rocks and Nick's eyes instantly swooped on the spot. He started to say something but before he got out a word he heard the terror-stricken scream of a horse—Show Me's bayo coyote, probably—going down into the chasm. A moment later a second scream rang out.

"My God!" Grace muttered. "That sounded like both of them."

"One was the horse."

"And who was the man?"

"How should I know?"

"I think it was Show Me."

"What difference does it make? We're all at each other's throats here, aren't we?"

"I wouldn't say that, Nick. If we split that cache up the middle it wouldn't be so bad."

Nick laughed mirthlessly. Grace shifted his position, putting his back to the drop-off so he had a clear view of the trail. Or, Nick thought, so I can't get behind him.

Galt Yamp's horse came up the trail, empty-saddled, and loped, wally-eyed, into

the meadow. Nick and Grace just stared.

Show Me came next, hugging the wall, one hand raised to catch hold of any rough edges he could find. When he reached the top he leaned his head against the rock and took a long breath, wiping his hand across his face. "Oh, my!" he groaned. "Oh, my!"

"What happened?" Grace snapped.

"That dirty crook!" Show Me groaned again. "He tried to kill me."

"That's a lie," Grace flared. "He stopped to help you and you booted him overboard. Hell, anybody could see through you a mile off. All this lollygaggin' about gettin' the vapours. You make me sick. You baited him into climbing down off his horse and then kicked him overboard."

"It ain't so, Al," Show Me insisted. "I don't know what's eatin' you, anyway. If you look at it from one way, it pans out better for the rest of us, splittin' the cache only three ways."

"That ain't the way I look at it," Grace stated. "Galt was a friend of mine, an' you ain't."

Purdy ran his tongue along his lips, wondering if Grace would have said the same thing with the names reversed, if Galt Yamp had showed up instead of Show Me.

"And I stick with my friends, you double-crossin', black-livered buzzard," Grace went on.

"I'm tellin' the truth, Al," Show Me insisted. "Galt started it. The only reason he stopped to help me was so he could croak me. We tried to get the horse to moving, an' I was shovin' it in the rump when Galt stuck out his boot an' give me a shove. I like to went sailin' but I catched holt of my horse's tail an' hung on. The damn' animal started kickin' an' churnin', an' the first thing I knew he kicked Galt in the belly an' sent him off the cliff." Show Me put his hand to his face as if to blot out the memory.

"And I s'pose all the while you were hangin' onto the tail," Grace said.

"I let go."

"As a matter of fact," Grace pointed out, "the horse went over first."

"Oh, no it didn't."

"I heard it. Ain't that right, Nick?"

"That's what it sounded like to me," Purdy agreed. "The horse went first."

"Say, what is this?" Show Me complained. "You two gangin' up on me?"

"Not at all," Purdy stated. "I'm lookin' out for myself. So is Al. You better do the same."

"I never heard Galt was your friend before, Al." Show Me went on.

"You heard it now, you yaller, no-good, double-crossin'—"

"Listen, Al, he hated your guts. He told me himself. He would've shot you in the back for half a cent. He—"

"That's enough!" Grace snapped, shifting his head to look off into space.

Nick knew what was coming. And Show Me fell for it. Slow, stumpy-legged, clumsy, he got himself set, and his fat arm swung for his gun. He got it out of the holster and then a bullet hit him. The gun whipped out of his hand, making a sudden shimmer as it caught the light of the dying sun and dropped over the cliff edge.

Show Me's fat legs wilted under him and he sagged to the ground. Grace fired three more shots, jolting Show Me's body with each. Then he threw a swift look at Purdy and carefully saved his last shot. "Any objections, Nick?" he inquired.

Nick shrugged. "I told him it was between him and you."

"Words ain't nothin' here," Grace said.

"I reckon that's right," Nick agreed. "Why ask?"

Grace didn't answer. He gave Show Me a roll with his boot, then booted him over the cliff's edge.

THE day was far gone and the cool air came from the peaks. At first it was a relief but soon it became as exasperating as the heat. Nick had picked up some dead wood at the foot of the trail and built a small fire. He didn't like the idea of staying up here for the night but it was too late to start down. Too late and too risky, knowing now what he did.

Show Me, in spite of his claims, had had murder on his mind when he pulled up down there on the trail. So had Galt Yamp when he offered his help. And the same could be said for Al Grace when he claimed friendship for Galt, and shot Show Me down. Nick knew it would go on until only one of them was left, and he had to

play it accordingly. Like Al Grace had said, words didn't count here, and he suddenly realized that when a man had thrown the worth of his words away he had to depend on his gun. He had nothing else left.

"I reckon," he said finally, washing down the last of the dummy with black coffee, "we might as well face this. I'm fed up with beating around the bush. Now what d'you aim to do?"

Grace sat across the fire from him. "I don't get you, Nick," Grace said.

Purdy moved impatiently and put down his tin cup. "You know as well as I do that only one of us is going to get out of here alive," he stated. "That's what it's been building up to and the question is who it'll be."

"Balls of fire!" Grace exploded. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothin's wrong with me yet."

Grace laughed suddenly. "You're the damndest jigger. No wonder we never got caught."

"I don't intend to get caught now."

"Hell," Grace went on, laughing, again, "we're in this together all the way. I thought you understood that."

"We're in it together till one of us gets the bulge. If you can figure out a way of getting that cash out of there so nobody gets shot in the back go ahead and spill it."

"I never shot a man in the back, Nick, you know that."

"There's always a first time if it pays out big enough."

"I ought to gut-shoot you for that."

"Go ahead and try it."

Al Grace glared. His face twitched. But he didn't make a move. Purdy felt better. It showed Grace wasn't too sure of himself in spite of his gun savvy. He wanted more than an even chance.

"This is all damned silly," Grace muttered, pushing back his anger. "You've been figurin' so close all along you can't see straight now. You're spooked up, that's what ails you."

"All right," Nick challenged, "you go in there and get it."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Fetch it out here and we'll split it and sit out the night. In the morning you can go down, and I'll wait till you show yourself. Then I'll follow."

"That's easy enough to say. Why don't you go ahead and do it? You're the head man."

"S'pose we draw lots for the chore?"

Grace shook his head. "You think too fast, Nick. You'd have somethin' cooked up."

"We could toss our guns over the dropoff."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? You know I can throw down on you any time and make it count."

"I told you to try it, but you backed down."

"You're just askin' for it, Nick, badgerin' me like this. You got a scheme in your noodle."

Nick wished he had. The fire wouldn't last an hour and there was no firewood up here in this pocket to keep it going. This was something he didn't hanker to face in the dark, although it would be the same for both. Somewhere high up among the tumbled rocks a mountain lion, probably trapped up there by these intruders,

screamed its anger, and the horses went crazy. The racket kept on and Nick finally caught sight of the animal watching them from behind a rock, its eyes glowing like twin discs of living fire.

"I'm not goin' to listen to that all night," Al Grace growled.

"There's the carbine," Nick said. "Go ahead and take a crack at him."

"No, thanks," Grace answered.

"All right, then listen to it." Nick worried about his horse, afraid it would bolt down the trail and leave him stranded. It was a wry worry, considering the fact that he figured he probably had less than an even chance of coming through the night alive.

"That damn' cat's got more gall than I ever saw," Grace went on. "You'd think it would pull out, or somethin'."

"I reckon you better make up your mind to put up with it. It's probably got some cubs around here somewhere, and if that's the case it might even get up enough nerve to jump us right here when our fire peters out."

"I hate the damn' things," Grace muttered. He pulled the carbine toward him and Purdy didn't object.

When and if came to a showdown between them, Al would use his hand gun. With all his deadly speed it gave him an advantage he didn't have with any other weapon. The big cat kept up the racket but Al wouldn't risk a shot, figuring, no doubt, it would cost him a bullet in the back from Nick.

PURDY kept his feet near the fire, trying to hoard some heat, but there wasn't much of it left. He turned his eyes away from the small blaze so it wouldn't blind him, and when, at last, the heat gave out, he pushed back and found some comfort with his back against a rock. Grace moved to one side for the same reason, widening the distance between them. Thin fingers of flame lifted and died, like a man grabbing for something he couldn't reach, but at last it gave it up and smouldered away to nothing.

Nick moved again to get some protection from the rocks. Grace did the same and Nick lost track of him. Because of the high walls there was no way of skylighting a man. A piece of char snapped and a tiny glow crawled over it. The air touched it, like something neglected in its first hurry, and lifted it into flame long enough to throw a brief light. Long enough for Nick to see Grace had disappeared entirely.

Nick crouched and moved to better cover. He flattened out and listened but there was little to hear except the mutter of the big cat in the rocks across the pocket and the rush of the tiny stream.

Behind him the sheer wall of the pocket loomed like a black curtain, and Grace came at him from that direction. Possibly he heard something, or it might have been sheer instinct that convinced him Al was moving in on him. He stared till his eyes bulged and could make out nothing, but he played it as if he knew. One of the horses let out a frightened snuff somewhere to his right and the sound hit him like a blow. A cold sweat seeped along his ribs and made him shiver. His boots were a nuisance, scraping on rock with a betraying sound. A star dropped out of the sky and *whooshed* straight at him, like a fatal omen, until it melted to nothing. His trigger finger stiffened and his hand ached to the wrist.

An overpowering urge to call out and make sure one way or the other built up inside him. It forced sound to his throat but he choked it back with rising fury. It wasn't fear that touched him, but a sudden rage that a man could spend ten years of his life to bring himself to this, and nothing more. It raised the thought that it was small account to anyone, not even himself, who won this furtive showdown, and it pushed him on to reckless folly.

"Where in hell are you? Let's get this over."

Grace's gun raised a roar and chipped rock that spattered into Nick's face, but the bullet screamed off into space. Nick fired at the yellow plume it left behind, but it was a clean miss. Grace had moved to one side and got off another shot that scorched Nick's shirt down the back.

"So you couldn't stand the pressure!" Al jeered. "First time I ever knowed you to blow up."

Nick spread three fast shots. They didn't bring an answer. Grace was lost again. Nick jammed fresh cartridges into the cylinder, then fired a lone quick shot,

trying to fake an empty gun. It worked. Al charged in from the left. Nick heard the rush of footsteps coming at him like a rising storm. Yellow flame stabbed at him and his left arm wilted. He tried to use it to push himself around, and went flat on his face.

His head hit a rock and exploded with pain. He tried to roll but another rock blocked him in. He kicked with his legs and brought himself around so he could use his gun. He saw Grace against the sky, searching the ground. He brought his gun up with a twist of his hand and fired. Al lurched back, caught himself on the rock, and steadied himself. Nick fired again. Al lifted his gun but it sagged out of control and the bullet went wild. Nick emptied his gun this time, and Al caught most of it dead center. He humped a shoulder against the rock and tried once more to take Purdy with him, but his strength was gone. His life was gone, and before he could squeeze the trigger he fell dead on the ground.

NICK pushed up and examined his arm. The bullet had gone clear through the thick muscle and Nick tore up his shirt with his teeth to make wadding and bandage. The big cat had done with its yowling. The shooting had probably frightened it away. But he wasn't sure.

A long time later he was sure he heard it padding across the rocks. He heard the rasp of its claws and the quick silence when it came to a halt somewhere nearby. He fired his gun into the air. It was too dark to see anything. He wished to God it would get light. He heard rustlings and vague whisperings that came from different directions but he couldn't say definitely what caused them. Smelling blood, an animal like that might finally get up enough courage to attack.

He got his feet under him and moved away from Grace's body, to finish out the night with his back against the solid wall that rose a hundred feet above him. Time ran on, his teeth clacked with cold and his bones ached from the rough rubble under him.

The three horses found him, and stayed close in, tense and alert, snorting and blowing, all facing in the same direction, seeing something Pete couldn't see.

"That damned cat's still around here somewhere," Nick told himself.

The horses looked to him for safety, but he wasn't at all sure he could give it.

The only regret he had, when he looked back, was that he hadn't sided Show Me when Grace threw down on him. But, in the end, it wouldn't have made any difference. Show me, heady with success, would have tried the same thing Al had tried. It was a long trail they had ridden together, a trail tainted with the bitter smell of gunsmoke, and ending the same way here in this little pocket in the Lavender Mountains, everything coming to naught here in this high place.

He stood alone now, and it was the way he had thought he wanted it, the way he had planned it, to stand alone at the last if they went against him, but it wasn't what he wanted now. Death had spared him when it should have taken them all so none would be left to go down another trail in gunsmoke and violence. Death had spared him but he couldn't spare himself, and in the dark remnants of what was left of the night he destroyed, with his own bitter thoughts, what he had been, and the things inside of him that had made him so.

When morning came he caught up his horse, lame as he was, and put the other two on a lead rope. He meant to go empty-handed, but yielded to an impulse, and rode past the cleft in the rock where the cache was. It was deep and narrow, and dark as the inside of a man's hat, but he knew exactly where the cache lay. It was on a ledge that stood waist-high along one wall, carefully wrapped in gunnysack and canvas and oilcloth to keep out the wet. He could go in there without a light and place his hand on the exact spot. It wouldn't be any trouble at all.

He stood there for some time, speculating on what he had thought during the night, and what resolutions he had come to. Then at last he turned and rode away.

The big cat watched him out of sight, then backed off into the dark and flattened out on the ledge so her cubs could suckle, her head resting comfortably on a waterproofed bag that lay on the ledge in front of her.

WHEN A COWBOY FIGHTS FOR SHEEP

Windy McCloud was a cowboy born and bred. . . . Then what strange madness hit him at Box B ranch that drove him to killer pitch and pretty nigh to sell his soul — all for the sake of those smelly, hateful damn' critters called sheep?

A Novelette by THOMAS THOMPSON

Before either man could draw, Windy had his own gun out

CHAPTER ONE

Pass for Treachery Range

FIVE DOLLARS, Windy McCloud decided, was an uncomfortable amount of money. As long as a man had it he couldn't claim he was broke. At the same time it wasn't enough to do much with. He tossed the small gold coin in his hand, thought about it awhile and eyed the poker game making up at the back of the room. In time he made up his mind and walked back toward the table, a friendly grin on his homely face. "Room for some out of town money?" he asked.

Two of the men at the table were punchers. They wore sheepskin-lined vests, open, exposing belted guns. The third man was a tinhorn. This one smiled around his thin cigar, squinted dark eyes against the stream of smoke, looked for

agreement in his two companions and nodded. "Just for fun," he said. "Come on in." He hooked a chair out with his foot, half smiled at Windy and shuffled the cards rapidly. One of the punchers glanced at the clock on the wall. "Got a regular game coming up later," the gambler explained, "but our friend ain't here yet."

"I'll drop out when he comes," Windy said.

The gambler introduced himself as Harry Wethro. Without looking up he indicated the others as Tex and Gincoe. He flipped chips out of the rack, brushed cigar ashes off the green top table with the side of his hand and said, "Nickel, dime and two-bits all right?"

"Fine," Windy said. The other two men grunted. Harry Wethro riffled the cards and shoved the deck toward Windy for the cut.

"Jacks or better?" Windy asked.

"That's all right," Harry Wethro said. "Just sociable."

"Give me five dollars' worth for a starter," Windy said.

Everybody shoved in a white chip. Nobody had openers the first time around. They threw in their cards, added a chip and the deal passed to Gincoe. Windy's first two cards were kings, but the next three failed to back them up. He opened for a red and the other three stayed. Windy glanced over his cards, saw Wethro watching him with an interest out of proportion to the size of the pot, and called for three cards. The bets went around once and Windy won with his single pair. "Had them kings right from the first," he said, knowing they knew it.

After four more hands Windy knew he was being baited. He had bought in for five dollars, all he had, and with that amount on the table he had figured even a tinhorn like Wethro would want to be honest. It was plain now, though, that these three were fattening him up. It was Gincoe who said, "What the hell! Maybe our friend ain't coming."

"I sure hope he is," Tex said. "I don't want to spend an evening playing old maid like this."

Windy sized up the three men and took the bait. He had approximately ten dollars now—enough to bluff through one hand—and he decided to take a look at what was going on. He let his fingers run through his chips, tried to look eager and said, "If you fellers want to double the price of chips it's all right with me."

"Feelin' lucky, eh?" Gincoe said.

"Just don't want to spoil your fun, that's all," Windy said. "I can back up what I bet."

HE SAW the exchange of glances and felt a bit of pity for these three. They were plenty crude about it. He tried to guess what his next hand would be and he hit it right on the nose. A heart flush. Gincoe had a straight; Tex had three of a kind. The gambler had dropped out to make it look good. Windy raked in his winnings eagerly and stacked the chips up in neat piles.

Harry Wethro looked at him and said, "Stranger here, ain't you?"

"Yeah," Windy said. "But I sure do like your country. I was looking around for an investment." Wethro became more friendly.

The deal passed around to Windy and he let his thumb slide across the backs of the cards a few times. They weren't marked that way. Both Harry and Gincoe seemed to be dealing them the way they wanted them. Maybe these yahoos were smarter than he figured. He passed the deck to Wethro for the cut, dealt the cards and lost the hand. A signal flashed between Harry and Gincoe and Windy thought, Here comes the pitch.

Gincoe said, "Look, McCloud. You're an agreeable cuss and you seem to know how to play a man's game. How'd you like for the four of us to get one of Vard's back rooms and a bottle and have a good friendly evening? Looks like our friend ain't coming."

"Gosh," Windy said, all innocence, "I'd like it fine but I can't afford it. You see, all I had was that five dollars I put in and what with losing that last pot—"

They didn't believe him at first but gradually it sunk through. Harry Wethro said, "Why you cheap damn' tinhorn!"

"Why, what's the matter?" Windy said, getting to his feet. He was enjoying this.

Gincoe had a little more composure. "Beat it, McCloud," he said. "I see our

friend is here now. You go take a walk."

"Sure," Windy said, picking up his chips. He had won a little over ten dollars. "Where do I cash these in?"

"You don't," Harry Wethro said. "We were playing for fun, remember?"

The smile left Windy's face. He said, "Look, boys, you've had your fun and I've had mine. The next time you pick yourselves a sucker, size him up better first. Cash these chips."

Gincoe got out of his chair slowly. He was a big man, dark, square-jowled, thick-lipped. A muscle man. He reached across the table and gripped Windy by the shoulder. Windy brought up his right fist. It didn't travel more than a foot and it landed solidly against Gincoe's chin. Gincoe went over backwards, stiffly, and his head bounced on the floor. Windy said, "Don't put your paws on me, boys. I don't like it." Tex kicked over the table and came diving straight across the top of it.

Tex's intention, apparently, had been to butt Windy in the pit of the stomach with his head. He aimed a little too high and Windy cracked him in the center of the face with a neck-breaking uppercut. Tex rolled, both hands clapped to his broken face. The blood spurted between his outspread fingers. Wethro had kept to one side, the cigar still gripped between his teeth. The gambler stepped back now and his hand slipped inside his coat. At the same time Tex let out a bellow of rage and reached for his gun.

Tex was fast with a gun; the gambler was faster. But before either man could draw, Windy had his own gun out, the hammer back. He had drawn it smoothly, without effort, without even thinking much about it. He heard the sharp intake of breath from the men who had moved over from the bar. He saw the stupefaction on Tex's blood-covered face, the frozen surprise in the eyes of Wethro as both men held their half drawn guns.

Windy said softly, "Don't play that way unless you mean it for keeps."

A voice behind him said, "That was fast, stranger. Too damn fast! Put it away!"

There is something that creeps into a man's voice when he holds a gun or a winning hand. It makes no difference whether the man is little or big. The man who was behind Windy now was little. He had a star on his vest. The gun in his hand was regulation size. Windy turned, saw the gun covered Wethro and Tex as well as himself. He shrugged and dropped his own gun back into its holster. The little marshal said, "That's better. We don't cotton to gunslicks around here."

Wethro said, "He sat in the game looking for trouble. Tried to pull a blazer."

"Shut up, Harry!" the marshal said. "We don't cotton to card sharps, neither. You better be out of town before tomorrow night." The little marshal had a way of putting a lot of weight behind what he said.

"If it's all right with you, Marshal," Windy said, "I'll cash in my chips and be moseying along."

"It ain't all right with me," the marshal said. "You got a job?"

"I was just passing through," Windy said.

"You got any money?"

Windy colored a little but the marshal was in a position to ask the questions. Windy said, "I got these chips."

"It ain't my job to collect gambling debts," the marshal said. "Plain case of vagrancy. You got too slick a gun for you to be left roaming the streets. Come along, drifter. I got board and room for you."

"Now wait a minute," Windy said.

"Ain't got time," the marshal said. "I'm a busy man. Get going out that door."

The marshal lifted Windy's gun from its holster and turned the lanky redhead toward the door. As they started across the room Windy noticed a man at the bar watching them closely. He was a man about forty-five, well kept, pleasant looking. He was smiling with his mouth and as Windy looked at him the man winked. Windy couldn't figure what it meant and the marshal didn't give him time to find out. He stepped out into the cold night air and was headed up the street toward a building that was definitely a jail. Once he glanced back and saw the well kept man who had been at the bar standing there in front of the saloon watching him. He got the uncomfortable feeling that the man, whoever he was, was taking too much

interest in him. McCloud kept on walking.

WINDY had been in jail about three hours, he figured, when keys rattled and the marshal called to him. He got up and walked toward the open door and the marshal handed him his gun. "Why in hell didn't you say you was a friend of Abe Burrows?" the lawman demanded.

Windy had no idea who Burrows might be but he looked at the open door and at his own six-shooter, which the marshal was holding out, and decided conditions had definitely improved with this supposed acquaintance. He said, "You didn't ask me if I was a friend of Burrows."

"Damned if I can figure it, though," the marshal said. "I hope Abe ain't gone and lost his head. I don't like the crew he's hiring. That there is just what Garth Renton is waitin' for." Windy let the marshal think awhile on this and while the marshal thought, Windy wondered what the devil the man was talking about. The marshal said suddenly, "Just because you're a friend of Abe's don't mean I've changed my mind about you. I've seen men handle guns before and you didn't learn to handle yours by reading a book. You're on a probation, you hear? By granny, you better be workin' for Abe the next time you show up in my town or in you go for six months, get me?"

"Get you," said Windy McCloud.

"Your hoss is up to the stable," the marshal said. "City usually gives a man five dollars when he gets out but you ain't been in that long. You better stay out of town and you better stay the hell away from Garth Renton, you hear?"

"I hear," said Windy McCloud.

"And don't get smart."

"No, sir."

Windy holstered his gun and left the jail. The air outside smelled amazingly clean and free and Windy decided he had had enough of this town. He didn't much fancy riding at night so he figured he'd bed down in the livery stable and strike out early next morning. He didn't know where he was going and it didn't make much difference but he knew there were some cow outfits over around Prineville. Maybe he'd pick up a few days work and then drift south toward California.

He was walking down the dark street when a voice at his elbow said, "Howdy, McCloud. I see Big John decided to let you out."

The voice set off a chain of reactions that formed a split second-timed pattern. In the first place, no one but the men with whom he had played cards knew his name. Secondly, if any of these men were lurking here in the darkness it wasn't likely it was for a friendly purpose. When Windy turned, his gun was in his hand.

The voice said, "You *are* fast, aren't you?" The speaker stepped out of the shadows and the light fell across his face. It was the man who had winked at Windy at the bar.

"That's damn poor policy, friend," Windy said.

"Not really," the stranger said. "I had you covered."

"This is a friendly town," Windy said.

"It is if you want it to be," the stranger said. "Bardeen is my name. Vard Bardeen. I'm the one told Big John you was a friend of Abe Burrows. I put up ten dollars bail for you, too."

"That was damn white of you," Windy said.

"It's all right," Vard Bardeen said. "It was your money. I made Harry Wethro cash in your chips. He was pretty sore about it. I'd like to talk to you if you're interested."

"Why not?" Windy said. "What I was gonna do can wait."

"Shall we eat and talk at the same time?"

"My maw said it was bad manners to talk with my mouth full," Windy said, "but I never held much to that line of thinking."

"The Chinaman's across the street is pretty good," Bardeen said.

THEY ENTERED the restaurant and took a table at the back of the room. Bardeen pushed back his hat to show wavy, silver hair. He was close-shaven and smelled of a recent visit to a barber shop. He was smoothly handsome and well aware of it.

The Chinaman came shuffling over, grumbling to himself. He said, "Too late."

"No it's not," Bardeen said. "What'll you have, McCloud? You've got two

dollars coming from those chips I cashed in."

"Beefsteak," Windy said.

They sat there silently and Bardeen studied each feature of the drifter's face. He said finally, "You like sheep?"

"I ordered beefsteak, didn't I?" Windy said.

Bardeen laughed. "I figured as much," he said. He had a cup of coffee and watched Windy tie into the steak. After awhile he said, "I'll tell you where you can get a good job, McCloud. After that it's up to you."

"With this Abe Burrows?"

"If anybody asks you, yes," Vard Bardeen said. "In case you forget and say no, Big John will pick you up and put you back in the jug. He's funny that way."

"Big John is the marshal?"

"Obviously," Vard Bardeen said. "You want the job?"

"I don't want any more of Big John's hospitality," Windy said.

"I didn't figure you would," Bardeen said. He scribbled something on a notepad he had in his pocket. "Take the road toward Prineville," Bardeen said, shoving the note across the table. "There's a trail cuts along the top of the canyon turning off at Four Corners. You'll find the Pitchfork outfit at the upper end of the valley. Look up Garth Renton and give him this note. But if anybody asks you, you're working for Box B, remember?"

"I thought we had that straightened out," Windy said.

"You strike me as being smart, McCloud," Bardeen said. "Stay that way." He paid for the steak and the coffee and left the change from the two dollars on the table. He stood up then and his eyes were suddenly hard. "You didn't talk to me about this, McCloud."

"Nope," Windy said. "It's all between me and Abe Burrows of the Box B."

Vard Bardeen smiled. "You're a smart boy, McCloud." He turned and left the restaurant and when he was through the door the Chinaman came and snatched the plate away from Windy, mumbling something about it being too late. Windy decided the Chinaman didn't like Bardeen. He studied the end of a tootpick and realized that he and the Chinaman had something in common when it came to Bardeen.

But a ticket to freedom was a lot better than six months in Big John's cage. With winter well on a man could wind up shoveling snow for the city or chopping wood for the courthouse stove. It wasn't Windy's idea of the way to spend a vacation. He went back to the stable, found his gear and made himself a bed in the hay. The next morning he discovered that his stable bill was paid. He tossed the stableman a four-bit piece and rode out of town. Apparently no one watched him leave.

HIS FIRST intention had been to head south toward Klamath Falls, but the note Bardeen had given him kept getting in his way. The note said simply, "This one looks all right." It wasn't signed; it wasn't addressed. After wrestling with his curiosity for better than a half hour Windy shrugged and turned his rangy sorrel into the Prineville road. It wouldn't hurt to take a look.

Actually, he needed a job. But Vard Bardeen hadn't tried to conceal the fact that this particular job was based on a man's gun ability and Windy had never hired his gun for cash in his life. And then there was this business of Abe Burrows and the Box B. The fact that he was supposedly a friend of Burrows had broken him out of Big John's jail cell. But the note he carried was for a Garth Renton, a man who, if Windy recalled correctly, Big John had mentioned distastefully. He settled himself in the saddle and decided to have a quick look-see before drifting on. What the hell? If he didn't like what he found it wouldn't be hard to leave.

The land here was rolling, the air sage scented, and the wind that kept the temperature right at the freezing point wasn't raw and bitter. It was clean and coaxing. Windy half turned in his saddle and saw the snowy peaks of Jefferson and The Sisters behind him. Over his shoulder Hood loomed blue and gold. There was a wistfulness on his homely but pleasant face and his smoky blue eyes had a dream in them as he looked up the long and pleasant valley. God wasted a lot of country on men who didn't get out and look at it, he mused. He inhaled

deeply. His thin lips curled, his rather prominent nose wrinkled and he was suddenly more alert in the saddle. There was a new aroma in the wind, and it wasn't a pleasant one. It was a greasy, thick smell. An unmistakable smell. The smell of old sheep, not yet sheared.

Windy was a Pecos born man, tall, lean, a sociable cuss with a wandering way about him, a man who had been born with cows. He drifted a lot and he had a habit of finding his way into other people's troubles and he didn't worry much about it. He took a job when he needed it badly enough and he quit when he felt like it. He was a top hand on any cow outfit and he knew it. Life had been satisfactory and he had lived it his own way, not complaining. But there are certain places where any man draws a line. Working as a sheepherder was where Windy drew his.

He turned his head once more, trying to catch the same scent, but this time he sniffed daintily, like a man who needs to trace a foul odor but doesn't want to get a lungful of it. He missed the scent, but he did catch sight of the strange rig on the narrow road that cut the face of the cliff below him. Something kept the rig from being a chuck wagon, although that was what it looked like. And something kept the driver from being a man.

It was in the way the driver sat. Not flat-bottomed and slouched, like a man sits, but roundly erect with a sort of primness, like a woman achieves. Women, Windy had found, always sat as if they expected the man of their life to be waiting around the next turn. "By God," said Windy McCloud, "a female mule skinner."

There was a trail down the canyon side a short piece back, Windy recalled. It would cut down and intercept the narrow road about at the right point to meet the wagon. Windy wasn't a woman's man in the strictest sense of the word, but they did have a musical way of talking that was pleasant to hear. And you had to admit that it took a woman to fry a chicken. Might as well drop down and say howdy, Windy figured.

He took the steep trail, thrusting his feet deep into the stirrups, leaning back against the cantle as if he were used to this sort of thing. He looped the reins around the horn and rolled himself a cigarette without watching what he was doing. Actually, he was striking a bit of a pose. He had himself arranged about the way he wanted to look when he heard the scream. Close on top of that came the splintering crash and the sickening bellow of the terror-stricken mules. The sounds were too plain. The damn fool female had run her rig over the bluff!

The cigarette and the pose were forgotten now as Windy's horse anticipated the jab of the spurs. They slid down the last two hundred yards of the trail in an avalanche of loose gravel and hit the narrow, rocky road at a full gallop. They rounded the bend and Windy saw the two men and the girl. The rig was gone, with only a ruptured spot in the bank to tell what had become of it. The girl was still there, unharmed, apparently, and she was giving a good account of herself with the aid of a quirt. But the two men were too much for her and Windy saw one of them give the girl a back-handed slap that knocked her down. Windy threw himself from the saddle and without asking why or caring much he found himself in the middle of a man-sized fight. It wasn't until he had landed the first blow that he realized that one of the men involved was Gincoe.

CHAPTER TWO

Shotgun Boss of Box B

GINCOE wasn't taken by surprise this time. He had weight, and he had strength, and beyond that he had the memory of the quick clout Windy had given him back in the saloon. The other man was thin and wiry, a quick man. He got in a couple of short jabs to Windy's face and they didn't hurt much. The girl got mixed up and sliced Windy across the neck with the quirt and then stood there yelling that she was sorry. Gincoe kept out of it, letting the little man worry Windy, but when the time was ripe Gincoe stepped in and hung one on Windy's chin. The blow sent the red-headed drifter reeling backward and Gincoe followed casually and hammered another one to the side of Windy's head.

Suddenly there were four girls and sixteen Gincoes and the birds were singing just as if it had turned spring. Windy felt his face pulling into a silly grin. He lifted his hands, cocked his fists and Gincoe hit him again. The world turned around and the road came up and slapped him in the middle of the back. Gincoe made a running broad jump and landed in the middle of Windy's chest.

Windy saw the small man coming in, too. The small man was walking slowly, taking his time. He thought he saw the girl pick up a rock. He wasn't sure. The small man stopped walking. He threw up his hands and his feet went out from under him. He landed on top of Windy. Windy balled his fists. They felt as big as pillows and twice as light. He started swinging them around and it felt like he was punching a bag full of dough. His eyes narrowed and he saw a fist that was as big as a wagon bed. He just laid there and waited for it and finally it landed. Right on the point of his chin. The birds sang sweeter. The sun went down and the stars came out. And then the night was long and silent.

* * *

When he awoke there was no one there but the girl. She was down on her knees in the dust of the road. She was crying and stroking Windy's cheeks. He closed his eyes and let her stroke. It was all very pleasant. In time he moaned and put up his arms, figuring it would be more comfortable for the girl if she got a little closer. The stroking stopped and Windy risked opening one eye. He saw the girl standing above him, her hands on her very nice hips. She said, "All right, redhead. When you start reaching like that you no longer need sympathy."

"I must have been out," said Windy McCloud. He got to his feet and the road turned a few times and then settled down. He felt a little sick to his stomach and his knees were wobbly. He took a couple of steps and had trouble finding the ground. The girl's expression changed and she started toward him. Windy caught himself and took a deep breath. "No sympathy," he said.

He took a good look at the girl. Then he looked again. It was well worth the second look. She was cute enough to put into frame and small enough to hang on a big man's watch chain. Her high heel boots lifted the top of her flat crown hat just even with Windy's chin. Her eyes were green, he guessed, but it made him feel funny to look straight into them. Her hair was the shade of copper you think about and never see. She wore skin tight blue jeans and a man's long coat, which, wide open now, showed that she also liked her sweaters tight. It was an amazingly attractive sweater. Her lips were red with natural coloring and her nose was just right. Her chin was beautiful, even when it trembled a little, which it was doing now. He risked one more look at the eyes and saw the big tears that were just pushing through the long, dark lashes. He said, "Now, ma'am, I wouldn't do that."

She walked to the edge of the road and looked down into the deep canyon. He saw her shoulders start to shake. She said, "Now look what they've done!" He went over to look and it was only natural that he should put his arm around her. She moved closer to him as if she needed that arm, and they looked down into the canyon and saw the broken wreckage of the wagon. Then she turned her face against his chest as they saw the two dead mules.

Windy said, "You mean they did that on purpose?"

"Garth Renton will do anything to get his way," she said. "Even that."

SHE SEEMED to realize for the first time then that she was standing there in the arms of a stranger. She pushed herself away and the tears were gone. The chin was no longer trembling; it was jutting in defiance. It didn't make much difference. She was still beautiful. It was hard to find things to say to a woman so beautiful. Windy said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. My name's Windy McCloud." That didn't sound just right but he had already said it.

She offered her hand quickly, as a man might. "I'm Dolly Gilmore," she said. "Thanks for what you did. I'm not used to having people help me."

It wasn't a complaint nor a bid for pity. It was just a quick, accurate statement, and Windy got the feeling that this girl

would always make statements that way. Dolly, Windy McCloud thought. Of course that's her name. It would have to be. She's just like a dolly. He felt the hair lifting on the back of his neck and a wild vacantness was somewhere in his chest. I could explain to this girl why I never settled down, he thought. His knees got weak. Wups! Deep water! He squinted his eyes and tried to look mean. "Why if I'd a had any idea—"

"You would have ducked faster," Dolly said. There was a glint of devilment in her green eyes and Windy shifted his feet uneasily. "That was mean of me," Dolly Gilmore said. "You did the best you could." She put her hand on his arm and the thrill of it shot clear up into his shoulder. "What do you do, Windy McCloud?"

Windy thought fast. He had heard the name of Garth Renton twice now, and it hadn't sounded like a good name either time. He said what he had been told to say. "I've got me a job with the Box B. I'm on my way out there now."

He saw the expression change. It was in her eyes first. Green eyes could be very hard. He knew that, but he had forgotten. The mouth, which had been so full and sweet, became a straight line. The chin jutted farther than he had thought possible. She stood up and tried to make herself taller. It only made the sweater more attractive.

"So you're one of them," she said. She said it tiredly, disgustedly. "I might have known. Get riding, McCloud." He hadn't noticed the motion because he hadn't expected it, but she had lifted a small caliber revolver from the waistband of her jeans. The hammer was back and the gun was not far from his chest.

"Now listen," Windy said.

"Get riding," she said, "before I forget I'm a lady. And tell Garth Renton I'm not whipped yet and I won't be, regardless of what he does to Abe Burrows and regardless of how many gunhawks like yourself he hires." Her voice was getting high-pitched and her finger was quivering against the trigger. Windy didn't have much faith in a hysterical woman. He started backing toward his horse.

He stepped into his saddle and looked down at the girl. She was looking up at him and she still held the gun. It was apparent she didn't like him. He said "I'm a stranger here, ma'am. Could you tell me how to find the Box B?"

"Gladly," she said. "Just keep going right on up the valley. And I hope Abe blows you in two with a shotgun."

"Good luck to you, too, ma'am," Windy said. He touched the sorrel's flank's with the spurs and made a show of riding wide around the girl. When he glanced back she was still standing there in the road, looking after him. Come hell or high water I'm gonna have a look at the Box B, he said to himself and he put a turn between himself and the girl. But even after she was out of sight he still remembered what she looked like.

He stuck to the road and it eventually dropped down to the floor of the valley. The smell of sheep became disgustingly clear in the chilly air as he rode farther into the valley. He spotted them then, a huddled band of nearly a thousand, cutting the grass down to the roots near a small stream. He turned his horse to keep upwind and he didn't try to conceal the disgust he felt. Prettiest damn cow-country a man ever saw and here it was full of sheep.

A sudden thought struck him. "Lordy me," he said aloud. "If I tell folks I'm working for Box B maybe I'm admitting I'm a sheepherder." The pattern of things started to clear. He rode another mile and came to the most dilapidated collection of buildings he had ever seen in his life.

What had once been a fair-size barn now lay flat on the ground, its shakes scattered over a two hundred yard area. The wind might have done it but it looked more as if it had had help in falling. There was a smal house with shattered windows that might have been broken with rocks. Or bullets. The house had a porch that had been ripped loose at one end. What might have been a branding corral was now a ragged square of isolated posts. There was a tall, framed gate set in a non-existent fence and on the frame of the gate, swinging by one gimble, a sign creaked in the small wind. Burned into the board was a bold BOX B. Windy pulled in his horse and sat staring at the layout. There was no sign of life anywhere.

Windy surveyed the setup carefully and then rode around the gate and up the rutted lane to the house. He circled the house once, dismounted and ground-tied his horse. He called out but there was no answer. Sign showed that sheep had bedded out near the old barn. He stood there a second, scratching the back of his head, then he walked over and stepped up onto the sagging porch. He reached out to open the front door but the door opened of its own accord. Two bright eyes stared out of a leathery face. Below the eyes was a bristling mass of white beard.

Below the whiskers was a patched canvas jacket, and below that two short, bowed legs cased in faded blue jeans stuffed into scuffled boots. Somewhere between the boots and the whiskers there was a sawed off double barrel shotgun, cocked and ready for action. The beard parted slightly and an amazingly young voice said, "Come on in out of the weather, young feller. If I kill you there I'll mess up my porch."

"Since you've asked me so polite," said Windy McCloud, "I reckon I will." He stepped inside and heard the door close behind him.

THE INSIDE of the house had a woman cleaness about it and immediately Windy caught himself thinking of Dolly Gilmore. The few chairs were set in appointed places. There was a cloth on the dining room table. Through an open door he saw a kitchen and the sink under the hand pump was scoured clean and there were no dirty dishes. The bearded man cuddled his shotgun affectionately and made no move to speak. The silence grew nervewracking. Windy said, "I'm looking for the Box B."

"You've found it," the bearded man said.

Windy let that lay for a few moments. "I'm looking for Abe Burrows," he said then.

"That's me," the old man said. "Go on."

"Big John, the marshal, said maybe you'd fix me up with a job," Windy said hopefully.

"Big John did like hell," Abe Burrows said. "Vard Bardeen sent you out here. He said for you to tell everybody you met you was working for the Box B. You know damn well you ain't workin' for me and you wasn't supposed to. You was supposed to check with Garth Renton. Got any more to say about it?"

"Guess you've said it," Windy said. "Sorry to have troubled you. Reckon I'll be riding along."

"Reckon you won't," said Abe Burrows, shoving the muzzle of the shotgun against Windy's middle. "This here thing has got to come to an end sometime and it might as well be you as the next one. I've held off as long as I could because Big John told me it was the thing to do and I didn't want to get Dolly mixed up in it. But now, by God, I've taken all I can take. If they string me up it will just save me livin' out my years as an old man. And if Dolly loses her sheep maybe that will be a good thing too. Maybe then she'll settle down and marry some nice young feller like I been trying to tell her to. Dad bern stubborn female woman. When she gets them brown eyes of her a sparkin'—"

"Green eyes," said Windy McCloud.

"What's that?" said Abe Burrows.

"Green eyes."

"How in hell do you know?"

"I'm younger than you are."

"Impudent damn pup!" said Abe Burrows. Then suddenly: "Where'd you see Dolly?"

"Back there in the road," Windy said. "A big ape called Gincoe and some skinny little yahoo had just run her wagon off the bluff."

COLOR drained out of the visible part of the old man's cheeks. The gun jabbed into Windy's belly with a force that made the redhead back up. "Dolly all right? What the hell have you done to her?"

"She's all right," Windy said. "Last I saw of her she was standing in the middle of the road with a gun in her hand. I think she was cussing."

"Ah-ha!" said Abe Burrows. "Three growed men and she run you all off. That's my Dolly."

"Two grown men and Mrs. McCloud's sleepy boy Windy," the drifter corrected. "I tied into 'em but I zigged when I should have zagged."

Abe Burrows was plainly bewildered. It was an encouraging sign. "How come you tied into 'em?" he asked. "They work for Garth Renton, same as you."

"Me and Gincoe decided we didn't like each other," Windy said.

"I'll be derned," said Abe Burrows. "Just like Dolly figgered. She said all you gunhawks would get likkered up one of these days and start killin' yourselves off."

"Now lookee here," said McCloud. "Why don't you put down that shotgun and let's you and me talk peaceful. I ain't killed nobody and I don't intend to. That friend of yours, Big John, had me locked up in his coop. A man came along and bailed me out and said I had a job on the Box B. All right, I'm here, ready to go to work. If you got troubles and this Big John lawdog is such a good friend of yours, why in hell don't you turn it over to him and stop jabbing people in the belly with shotguns?"

"Because Big John's jurisdiction don't go no further than the city limits," said Abe Burrows, "and the yellow-bellied sheriff we got in this country ain't interested in nothin' but votes. That damn sheriff knows dang well what Garth Renton is up to. Probably even knows you're workin' for him. Fact is, you're probably wanted for murder or something worse and the sheriff said if you'd behave he wouldn't chase you until after election."

"Who in hell says I'm working for Garth Renton?" Windy demanded.

"Vard Bardeen told you to go to work for him, didn't he?"

"But I ain't done it, have I?"

"But you will."

"How in hell do you know so much?"

"Because you're just a lowdown, gun-slingin' refugee from the law and you got to do what Bardeen says because Bardeen tells the sheriff what to do. But this time I'm gonna put a stop to their hash, dad blast 'em, and I may blow Bardeen and the sheriff apart too, while I'm at it. Let's go out by the woodshed, redhead. I don't want to mess up Dolly's nice clean livin' room."

WINDY had backed up, nearly to the wall. He was standing with his hands raised shoulder high. Abe Burrows stood in front of him, the shotgun leveled. Windy took a deep breath. Somewhere down inside him anger was beginning to grow into a hard, round ball. He was being pushed around and he didn't like it. He stood there, almost relaxed, and then suddenly his hands shot out and gripped the barrel of the shotgun. He twisted hard, throwing his entire weight into it, and he jerked old Burrows completely off his feet.

The gun came out of Abe's hands. Still gripping it by the barrel, Windy raised it over his shoulder as if he were going to bash the old man's head in with the butt.

"Now, dad bern you," Windy said, "let's talk a little more peaceful like, you mop-faced old badger, before I use this gun for a shinny stick and start knockin' your head around the yard."

Abe Burrows never batted an eye. He worked his jaws and spat close to Windy's feet. "Go ahead and knock my brains out," he said. "Beat a helpless old man to death and then run a poor innocent little gal out of the country. You sure as hell are a fine example of manhood."

"Ah, shut up!" said Windy McCloud. He lowered the gun, broke it and jacked out the two shells which he kicked aside with his foot. After that he tossed the gun into a corner. "I'm getting out of this country," he said. "Everybody around here is nuts."

Abe Burrows had cocked his head to one side. He looked amazingly like a fuzzy-faced owl. "Timed right to the second," he said. "You hear that?"

Windy caught the sound of horses being ridden hard. He moved to where he could see out the window. Three riders were coming down the valley at a fast lope. Two looked like the men he had seen back where Dolly Gilmore's wagon had gone over the cliff. The third was a man he hadn't seen before. He guessed it was Garth Renton.

"Yup," Burrows was saying. "There come your playmates. Reckon Vard Bardeen sent word out you'd be here. Go on out and greet 'em, redhead. Make it purty and start drawin' your hundred dollar a month blood money, you damn sheep killin', gun-slingin' son."

The three riders had pulled up in a welter of dust. Gincoe and the man with him took places out there by the tumble-down barn. The third man dismounted and walked boldly toward the house. He was a

big man, wide of girth, slope-shouldered, bull-necked. He wore two guns slung low on heavy hips, and he walked like a man who knew where he was going. The brim of his hat was pinned back to the crown with a safety pin and it gave him a look of blunt determination. The day was cold but his plaid wool shirt was open half way to his navel, exposing his gray wool underwear. His tread was heavy on the sagging boards of the porch and when he hammered on the door with his balled fist a tinkle of broken glass fell from one of the windows.

"Go ahead," Burrows said. "That's your boss. He's been baitin' me like that for months. Go ahead, redhead. Open the door."

Windy opened the door and Garth Renton's breath caught him full in the face. "You McCloud?" Renton said.

"I am," said Windy.

"Well don't stand there like a damn' ninny," said Garth Renton. "When you work for me, you work. You got something for me?"

"I have," said Windy McCloud. His right fist traveled from a point even with his shoulder. It smacked solidly against Renton's chin. Renton went over backwards, left the porch and landed on his neck in the weeds. He lay very still. Windy closed the door and dusted his hands. "Now what was it you was saying?" he said to Burrows.

Abe's eyes were as round as dollars. His tongue shot out and groomed his whiskers. "I was sayin' we ought to talk this over, you and me," said Abe.

"That's what I thought you was sayin'," said Windy McCloud.

CHAPTER THREE

The Coming of Big John

ABE BURROWS had lost his speech and half his starch. He stood there batting his eyes, looking at Windy McCloud, slow admiration growing on his leathery face. He said finally, "Doggone it, I been wantin' to do that for months."

"Then why didn't you?" said Windy.

"Because that's just what the sheriff's been waitin' for," said Abe. "A couple months ago I took a horse whip to a feller who was askin' about my business and I been under a sort of peace bond ever since. They tore down my barn, busted my windows—why they practical spit in my eye and I ain't been able to do nothin' about it. Now you come bustin' in here and start it up." The old man's eyes twinkled. "And I ain't sorry about it, neither."

"How come they're so set on getting you, Abe?" Windy asked.

"How come?" Abe said. "Ever heard of the Regulators? No, I reckon you ain't. Well, that's a bunch of cattlemen north of here that's decided there shouldn't aughta be no sheep in eastern Oregon. Me, I figger a man's got a right to do what he damn well pleases with his own land. I leased my place out to Dolly Gilmore. Garth Renton figgers I should have leased it to him for his cows."

"Where's this Vard Bardeen fit in?" Windy wanted to know.

"He's the money behind Renton, close as I can figger it," Abe said. "He owns the sheriff and he owns half the county. He wants the rest of it."

"Why don't your friend Big John there in town do something about it?" Windy demanded.

"On what charge?" Abe said disgustedly. "Is there any law against a man being ambitious?"

"But tearing down your barn. Bustin' out your windows?"

"This here is county, I told you, you ninny," Abe said. "You just try and get a warrant served in this county against anybody without Bardeen's say so and see how far you get. They keep spreadin' it around I been hirin' gun slingers, trying to turn folks against me. One of these days they'll get me on something and they won't have to tell the jury how to decide. They've done made up their mind."

Gincoe's voice, out by the shed, broke the following silence between the two men. Gincoe was calling Garth Renton, softly at first, then more insistent. "Garth! Hey, Garth! What's keepin' yuh?"

Windy walked over to the window. "Garth is sleeping real pleasant, Gincoe," he called. "You and that geezer with you had better get on your horses and high tail it out of here. Come around and pick up Garth and take him with you."

There was a long silence, then Glen-

coe's voice again. "That you talkin', McCloud?"

"You guessed it," said Windy.

There was a hurried consultation out by the barn and then Gincoe called again. "Listen, McCloud. You and me got off on the wrong foot but I ain't gonna hold that agin yuh."

"I'm holdin' it agin you," Windy said. "Come out with your hands in sight and pick up your boss."

Gincoe's voice was oily smooth. "Listen, McCloud, don't be a damn fool! You know which side of your biscuit has got the butter on. We could blast you and that old goat to hell out of that shack."

"Try it," invited Windy.

"Hee!" said Abe Burrows. "This is what I been a waitin' for. They'll hang me up to a limb, like as not, but by granny I'll have company." He picked up the shotgun and shells, loaded the weapons and stepped to the window. "All right, Gincoe," he yelled. "Go ahead and start the damn' thing!"

Gincoe and his companion held another hurried conference. Gincoe was slow witted but he wasn't crazy. This was a poor spot in which to start a gunfight and he knew it. He was a man, Windy figured, who didn't like even odds and along with that he had the disadvantage of being out in the open while Windy and Abe were inside the house.

Gincoe said, "You let us get Garth and we won't cause no trouble. This here is a case for the sheriff."

"It sure as hell is," Windy yelled. "You three are guilty of trespassing."

"Let's see you try to make that stick," Gincoe taunted. "You ain 't gonna be very popular around here, McCloud."

"Tell that to Vard Bardeen," Windy said.

"I will," Gincoe promised.

Windy drew his six-shooter and fired once. A good-sized splinter flew from the corner of the flimsy shed.

"Hold your fire, damn it!" Gincoe yelled. "I told you we didn't want no trouble."

"Hustle it up then," Windy said. "This is a .45 and it'll tear right through the wall of that shed. Keep your hands in sight when you come out."

GINCOE and his companion came out from behind the shed, hands shoulder high. There was raw rage on Gincoe's face but he didn't try to start anything.

Windy said, "You'll find your boss right here by the front steps. Don't make no fast moves. I can see you plain."

"Let me give 'em a sting of buckshot," Abe said.

"You hold your temper," Windy advised. "You'll get us both killed off. You've got a gal to think about, remember?"

"Yeah," Abe said. "Hadn't thought about that."

"Maybe I better do the thinking from here on," Windy said. "You ain't doing so good."

"Now don't start gettin' uppity," Abe said.

Windy was busy watching Gincoe and his companion. They came around the house, walking on eggshells, and Windy shifted to the front window where he could see them struggling with Renton's bulk. He saw Gincoe fumbling toward one of Garth's guns and he placed a shot directly between Gincoe's feet. "Don't do it, Gincoe," Windy advised.

Renton got to his feet, shaking his head. Windy heard Gincoe say, "Come on, boss. He's got us covered." Garth Renton started walking and he made one complete circle. Gincoe helped him into the saddle and then he and the thin faced man went to their own horses. They mounted and the three rode off in the direction of town. Windy hooked a stream of perspiration off his forehead with a crooked finger. "That was too damn easy," he said. "They've got an ace in the hole."

"Sure they have," Abe Burrows said. "They don't need to stand there and get theirselves shot up. They'll go to the sheriff and claim I started a shootin' war and the whole damn county will be on their side because I got sheep on the place."

"I always knew I shouldn't get mixed up with woollies," Windy said, half to himself.

"I don't give a dang for myself," Abe said. "Just so we get Dolly out of it."

"How long you figure it will be before they get back here?" Windy asked.

"I don't reckon they need to hurry," Abe said. "Vard Bardeen will want to do

it all legal like. They'll check with him first."

"How about the girl?"

"She'll be all right," Abe said. "Bardeen will see to that. He's figgerin' on marryin' up with her soon as he gets her busted down to size."

Windy felt an unreasoning anger and he knew it was showing in the sudden tensing of his hands as he rolled a cigarette. He knew that if he said anything now he would say too much, so he kept his mouth shut.

Abe Burrows seemed to be thinking out loud. "If she was down by Devil's Elbow when she went over she was takin' supplies down to them two Indian sheepherders of hers. That bein' the case, she'd go into town. Yeah," he said brightly. "She'll be all right." Windy McCloud didn't answer but he suddenly felt better.

The time passed slowly, broken only by the squeaking of the sign that hung from the framed gate. The sound of horses was a relief in the stillness, even though it might mean trouble. Abe picked up his shotgun and fondled it. For one swift second the old man's eyes were as soft as a woman's. He said, "You don't have to stick around here, redhead. There ain't nothin' keepin' you." He watched Windy draw his six-shooter and go to the window. Scrubbing a finger back and forth under his nose, Abe said, "I got a couple of rifles and plenty ammunition. Got some for your .45, too." He put the gun down.

Windy studied the riders coming from the direction of town. There were two of them and again he got that feeling that one of them was not a man. He felt his heart amazingly strong and slow, high in his chest, and he motioned for Abe to come take a look. Abe squinted his faded blue eyes and gave a short grunt that might have been either relief or disappointment. "It's Dolly," he said. "That's Big John with her."

They watched the two riders and Windy found himself remembering the green eyes, the pert chin that had trembled, the upturned nose. It suddenly seemed natural that he should be here and Abe Burrows was like an old friend. The girl dismounted gracefully and Big John climbed tiredly out of his saddle. Abe hurried to open the door. The girl put her arms around Abe and gave him a quick kiss and then she started to cry. She gave no indication that she had noticed Windy.

But Big John had noticed him. He stood there, a tired look on his face, his feet spread. And then slowly, he drew his gun. "I didn't expect to find you this easy, McCloud," he said. With his left hand he took a pair of handcuffs from his belt.

CHAPTER FOUR

Five Dollar Pilgrim

THERE was no humor in the little lawman's eyes. He had taken two steps forward before Abe Burrows gripped him by the arm. "Wait a minute, John," Abe said softly. "What is this?"

"Murder," Big John said. "There's a tinhorn gambler by the name of Harry Wethro. He's got a bullet hole in the back of his head. He got killed in town and that makes it my business."

"What's that got to do with McCloud?" Abe exploded.

"Plenty," the marshal said. "He and Wethro had a run in. Everybody saw McCloud draw a gun on him."

"But hell, man," Abe protested. "Windy's been right here for the last three hours. He's workin' for me, John, no strings attached. He knocked Garth Renton's teeth plumb down his throat."

"I know about that, too," the marshal said. "The sheriff's got an assault and battery warrant out for him. But my murder warrant comes first."

Dolly Gilmore spoke for the first time. "Wait a minute, John," she said. "I made a mistake, telling you what I did. I thought Mr. McCloud was just another hired gunman going to work for Garth. He told me he was going to work for Abe, but I didn't believe him. He tried to help me, John."

"I'm sorry, Dolly," Big John said.

"Listen, John," Abe Burrows said. His voice was soft. "I tell you Windy's been here with me."

"He'll get a chance to prove that," Big John said. "It's just suspicion of murder I want him for. There's no bail for that."

"You're not taking him, John." Abe Burrows voice was flat and hard now.

"Abe," the marshal advised, "don't get yourself mixed up in this."

"Whether I do or don't is my business," Abe said. "You're not taking him." The shotgun was standing there in the corner. Abe picked it up easily and leveled it toward the marshal.

"You wouldn't do it," Big John said.

"You know me better than that, John," Abe said softly. "Put that gun back in your holster."

"It's all right, Abe," Windy said. "Don't get yourself messed up."

"You ride out of here, McCloud," Abe said. "I want you to know I appreciate your trying to help."

Windy looked at the girl. Tears were near her eyes and her chin was trembling again. He had never felt so completely helpless in his life. He said, "Abe, listen to me." The shotgun moved slightly.

"Get going, McCloud," Abe said. "I'd rather shoot you myself than see you strung up on a trumped-up murder charge."

"Listen," Big John started.

"You're hard-headed, John," Abe Burrows said. "When you get your mind set on some point of the law you never change. This time you're wrong, John. Go get your horses, McCloud." He spoke to the the girl. "Dolly, rustle him up a little bait of grub to take along."

There was no use arguing with Abe, Windy saw. He thought of Vard Bardeen, owning a crooked sheriff, trying to force this girl into marrying him. And he thought of Gincoe and of Garth Renton. He knew he wasn't going to walk out without having a last say with those three, but he knew also that he was going to have to do it on his own. He went out and got his horse and rode around by the back door of the house. Dolly came out, a small package tied in a white dishtowel in her hand.

She came over to the horse and handed the package up to Windy. For a long second their eyes met and Windy knew that he didn't have to tell this girl anything. He reached down to take the package and their hands touched. She gripped his fingers tightly. "Don't do it, Windy," she said. "Stay out of it. I've been the stubborn one. I'll sell my sheep and get out of the valley. That's what they want. They'll leave Abe alone then."

"If it's not Abe it will be somebody else," Windy said. "As long as Vard Bardeen has his way it will always be somebody."

"Stay out if it," she said. She said it forcefully, but she said it as if she knew it would do no good. He smiled down at her and she squeezed his hand tighter. "Good luck, then," she said.

"Thanks, Dolly," he said. "Thanks a lot."

He spurred his horse and rode around the gate, back down the road toward town. He fought a desire to look back. He knew that she was standing there watching him and he knew that in the house Abe Burrows was arguing softly with Big John, the marshal.

HE DIDN'T have a plan and he didn't ask for a reason. Three men were running this show and it was a show that had to be stopped. He discounted the sheriff completely, for without ever having met the man he had decided that once Vardeen's power and money was removed the sheriff would hang himself. Windy's own reward for his part in it would probably be a WANTED poster that would haunt him from now until the end of things. That thought passed through his mind and he dismissed it. Nobody rode through life on a free ticket.

He was back to where the road climbed the cliff and he looked up the switchbacks and saw the dust of a single rider. Regardless of who it was Windy couldn't take a chance on being seen here. He forced the big sorrel up the sloping bank onto a small shelf that wasn't more than six feet wide. Here he dismounted and crawled along the side of the slope to where he could watch a half mile straight stretch of road.

It seemed an eternity before the rider came into view. It was Gincoe. He would be heading back to Pitchfork to round up the gunhawks to be sworn in as a sheriff's posse, Windy figured. He'd put a stop to that.

He hurried back to where he had left his horse, cursing the rocks that skidded out from under his feet and tumbled down into the road. Reaching the horse he hurriedly unbuckled his lariat and built a loop. He crawled to the edge of the bank then and waited. Gincoe was leaning forward in his saddle, spurring his horse hard. Windy

shook the twists out of his rope and swung the loop. Gincoe was almost directly below him when he made his throw.

He dug his heels against the shock of the rope, felt it grow slack and saw Gincoe hit the roadbed with a back-breaking jar. The force of the sudden tug jerked Windy off his insecure footing and he rolled down the bank. He lost his grip on the rope. His only thought was to break his fall. He lit on his feet, stumbled to his knees and drew his gun. Gincoe was up, clawing at the rope. Windy fired once at the man's feet, then blamed himself for his impatience. If the others were anywhere near, the shot would attract them.

Gincoe stopped struggling and stood there, his face contorted with pain. There was blood on his lips. Windy holstered his gun and picked up the rope. He kept it taut, as he might have with a calf, and he walked down it, hand over hand. He lifted Gincoe's gun and threw it over the side of the road and then with a couple of deft turns he tied the man's hands and feet. After that he climbed the bank, got his horse and led it back to the spot where he had ridden up. He picked up the free end of the rope, made two turns around the saddle-horn, mounted and started riding down the road, slowly. Gincoe's first scream stopped him.

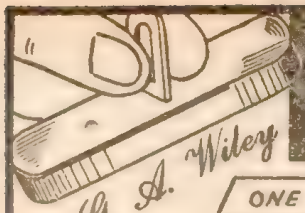
With one hand on the pommel, the other on the cantle, Windy turned slowly. "What's the matter, Gincoe?" he said. "Don't you like it?"

"You're crazy, McCloud!" Gincoe wailed. "I'm all busted up."

"I'm crazy, all right," Windy said. "Just crazy enough to know who killed Harry Wethro and blamed it onto me." He touched his spurs lightly and the sorrel moved forward, dragging the trussed up Gincoe along behind. The rope slacked and jerked taut as the body hit a rock in the road. Windy winced, but he kept riding until Gincoe was blubbering like a baby. Windy stopped then and turned again with that same slow deliberateness. "Want to tell me what you know, Gincoe?"

There was blood on Gincoe's face and the dust had mixed with it, forming a thick, black paste. Through it Gincoe's eyes stared wildly. "I done it," he said brokenly. "I didn't know they was gonna blame it on you, McCloud. I'll get the hell out of the country, see? I won't cause you no trouble."

"That's right. You won't," Windy said. He dismounted, throwing the rope free of the horn. There was a pitiful expectancy on Gincoe's battered face. Windy went back and caught up Gincoe's horse and led it over. He untied Gincoe's feet and left his hands bound. He had to help the man into the saddle. "Ride ahead of me, Gincoe," he said. "It don't do no good you telling me this. I want you to tell it where



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somebody can hear the whole thing."

They rode into town that way, Gincoe sagging in his saddle, neither man saying anything. They came in unnoticed and dismounted in back of Vard Bardeen's place. "Which door?" Windy asked.

Gincoe indicated the proper one with a nod of his head. Windy drew his gun and shoved it against Gincoe's back. "I'd just as soon kill you as not," Windy said softly. "I'll knock on the door. When they open it, you walk in. I'll be behind you." Gincoe nodded.

THE door opened immediately to Windy's knock. The room was a small, well furnished office. Vard Bardeen sat in a swivel chair, pushed back from the desk. After opening the door, Garth Renton had stepped back against the opposite door, the one that led out into the saloon. For a split second the group remained that way, motionless, and then Gincoe screamed. "Look out, boss! He's got a gun!"

Shielded by Gincoe's body, Windy didn't see the move. There was the crash of a heavy six-shooter, then Gincoe's dying cry. "Don't, Garth! Don't!" The gun blasted again and Gincoe's body twisted crazily before he fell, hands still tied.

Vard Bardeen was on his feet. "Garth! You fool!"

Windy's gun flashed into life. His aim was spoiled by Gincoe's falling body. Garth Renton twisted open the door and disappeared into the saloon. There was a man's coarse curse, a medley of shouts. Vardeen made a dive toward his desk and Windy's bullet plowed a furrow across the polished top. "Don't do it, Bardeen," he advised.

A fleeting smile crossed Vard Bardeen's handsome face. "You're not as smart as I thought you were, McCloud," he said.

"That makes you dumb, figuring I was," Windy said. He stepped over near the door that led into the saloon, still keeping Bardeen covered with his gun. "I want you to do some talking, Bardeen," Windy said. "I want folks to listen to it."

Vard Bardeen was smiling now. "Go ahead. Call them in," he said. "You've got two murders against you now. Harry Wethro's and Gincoe's there. They'll want

to hear about that, too. It'll be good."

"You'll talk, Bardeen," Windy said. "You'll talk if I have to choke every word of it out of you."

A half dozen men were pushing their way toward the door. Windy stepped back and covered them with his gun. "Come in," he invited. "Come in and listen to a skunk."

The men came into the room, their hands shoulder high. "Grab him, damn you!" Bardeen said. Sweat was beginning to appear on his forehead.

"When the time comes, you won't have to grab me," Windy said. "If you want to charge me with murder, I'll stand trial. But before you do that, you'll do as I say or I'll stand trial for more than one killing. Go through Bardeen's books there. Open that safe. I don't know what you'll find but maybe you'll find it's Bardeen that owns Pitchfork, not Garth Renton. Maybe you'll find that half the taxes the sheriff collects in this county go into Bardeen's pocket. Go ahead and take a look."

"Touch anything in here without a search warrant and I'll see you all in jail," Vard Bardeen said. "That's Gospel!"

A voice outside the door said, "Maybe that can be arranged, Bardeen." It was Big John, the marshal. He shouldered his way through, a gun in his hand. "You're still wanted, as far as I'm concerned, McCloud," the marshal said. "Put that gun away and it'll go easier on you."

"I'll put it away when you tell me you'll check into Bardeen's records," Windy said. "Not before."

"That part of it is my business, McCloud," Big John said. He spoke to a man who was standing near him. "Go get Judge Bain. Tell him I want a search warrant."

Bardeen had backed over closer to the desk. "Damn you, McCloud!" he cursed. He ducked and his hand slapped open the top drawer. His fingers had just closed around a pearl handled revolver when Windy fired. The bullet caught Bardeen high in the right shoulder, spinning him around, knocking him back against the wall. He stood there, gripping his shoulder with his left hand, the color draining slowly from his face.

"Put the gun away, McCloud," Big

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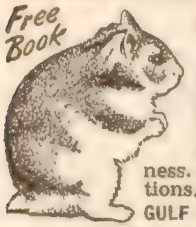

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John said. "I'll handle this thing my way."

"I could have shot straighter, Bardeen," Windy said. "But I figured these folks would want to hear you talk."

"Yeah," one man said, suddenly bold. "Let's see the records."

Another said, "Go get the sheriff. We'll want him in on this too."

And a half hour later a badly shaken Vard Bardeen, his shoulder crudely bandaged by the town doctor, sat at his desk, his face in his hands. The man who had gone out to look for the sheriff came back. "The sheriff lit a shuck out of town," he reported. "Reckon that convicts him if you ain't got evidence enough."

"There's plenty of evidence," Big John said. "Come along, McCloud. The law says I lock you up, but I don't reckon your trial will amount to much. You too, Bardeen. You're gonna have a long time to think."

They went out of the saloon together, Big John, Windy and Vard Bardeen. Windy and Bardeen walked ahead, Big John close behind them, his gun in his hand. The marshal hadn't bothered to take Windy's gun. They were half way to the jail when the shot crashed across the stillness of the street. Windy dropped flat on his stomach, drew his gun and fired at the puff of smoke.

Big John made a dive for the curb and got behind the protection of a porch post. The hidden gun blasted again and dust spurted in Windy's eyes. There were two more shots in quick succession. Vard Bardeen started running up the street. A bullet from Big John's gun shattered Bardeen's leg just below the knee. Bardeen rolled over and over, howling in anguish.

There was a patch of blue shirt visible at the corner of a building. Windy fired once. He waited a long time before Garth Renton came out from behind the building, a gun in each hand. Renton was walking with a jerky, erratic motion, his head flipping awkwardly. The hat, with its pinned up brim, fell from his head and rolled out in front of him. He stood there staring at it and then he fell on his face and was still. Windy got to his feet, a slow sickness inside him. He said, "I'm ready to go, Marshal. Let's be getting at it!"

ABE BURROWS and Dolly came to visit Windy in his cell. "Hell's fire," Abe said, slapping him on the back. "You'll be out of here in two days time. The more they dig into Bardeen's business the more they find. They're payin' *me* a little more respect, too. They've taken my word for it that you was with me all the time you was supposed to be killin' Harry Wethro. And Big John, he says if you shot Gincoe in the back, like Bardeen still says, how come the bullet went in through his chest?"

Dolly Gilmore looked pale and shaken. Windy saw it and he said, "Let's talk about something else."

There were a lot of things he wanted to say to Dolly Gilmore. He wanted to tell her how it was that sometimes a man got enough of drifting and felt like settling down. But when he looked into her eyes he lost his voice. Besides that he kept thinking of all those sheep and how a man might get tired of those stupid, smelly creatures. The girl left finally and Windy still hadn't said a word to her.

Abe Burrows said, "Windy, I want you to stay with me. It ain't just runnin' the place. I'm thinkin' about Dolly."

"Yes?" Windy said hopefully.

"Well, dern it, a gal as pretty as her, she ought to get married and settle down."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Now you and me," Abe said, "we're older. There's half a dozen young bucks after her. Some of 'em would make her a good husband, some of 'em wouldn't. You and me could sort of keep an eye on her. Like a couple of daddys. You know."

Windy McCloud sighed deeply. "Yeah, I know." He said, "Go along now and look after her, will you, Daddy? I want to catch some sleep."

But he didn't sleep. He lay back, his hands behind his head, and he thought for a long time. Damn it, I ain't *that* old, he kept telling himself. But he thought wistfully, I reckon I'm old enough.

He'd be out of here in a couple of days with a full belly and the five dollars that the city would give him. Then he'd ride. And he knew already that the road he'd take wouldn't be toward the Box B. It would be south, toward good weather.

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(Continued from page 71)

roared. Valcour sighed and buckled almost at Brice's feet. Turning wearily aside and wholly lacking understanding, Brice groped for a chair. In the doorway of the car, a smoking gun in his hand, stood Len Kish.

There was much that happened then, much. But it added to nothing more. An hour later, with the deep bullet-gouge across his chest competently bandaged, Colman rested on the divan in Valcour's car. Kish was getting thoroughly and quietly drunk in a corner at the far end of the salon, relishing Ned Valcour's private stock of whiskey.

Janet Valcour, still wearing her clinging robe, knelt on the carpet beside the divan, her eyes earnestly on Colman. "This is really the end now, Brice. No more wrecking and destruction and violence?"

Colman nodded. "Yes. Its back is broken. There won't be any talk, any scandal. I'll see to that. Your uncle suffered an unfortunate accident. That's all. And the road will go on. It needs help. But the paddies and teamsters and tie-crews will build it, even if there isn't any money. It's that kind of a thing."

"There'll be money, Brice," the girl said quietly. "I'm Uncle Ned's only heir. He's already bought a lot of the bonds. As soon as I legally can, I'll start buying U.P. securities, too. But steadily, this time, so that the market will rise. And on a rising market, others will buy. You can tell me how to do it."

Colman shook his head. "That's office work, paper work. I'll be at end-of-track until the last spike is driven."

"That's what I mean," the girl said. "I'll be there, too. I want this to be my road, also. I want to see every tie put down."

"That's all you want?" Colman asked her.

She shook her head, still smiling. "No, Brice. But that's something we can talk about when the last spike is driven, somewhere ahead in Utah. You'll be busy until then. A busy man can't talk of love, and I won't accept any half-way measures!"

THE END

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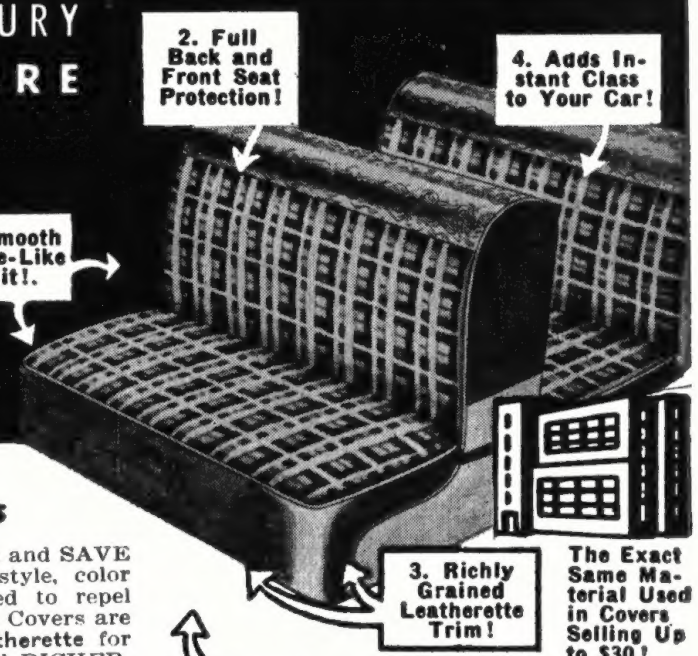
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